

**NO REST FOR**

# **Biggles**

**CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS**



BIGGLES CONSIDERED the faces round the table of the

high-level Court of Enquiry appointed to investigate the disappearance, over Africa, without trace, of three aircraft within a few weeks. Two were civil machines, air-liners of regular services; the other, the last, was a Hastings of R.A.F. Transport Command. He had been called to the conference room for expert opinion, but as this had not so far been sought he had merely listened to arguments which, almost without exception, favoured the "accident" theory in one form or another.

At last the President addressed him directly. "Inspector Bigglesworth, do you concur in the view that these machines were lost through accident?"

"No. sir," answered Biggles, quietly but firmly.

The President looked uncomfortable. "You think there can be no question of structural failure."

With all eyes on his face Biggles answered: "That is what I think, sir."

"Not even in phenomenal air turbulence?"

"There's no record that such conditions were encountered."

"But if they had been?"

"The radio operator would have reported them." "There might not have been time." 5

"All I can say to that, sir, is, I do not believe that three practically new machines of different types, each with a proved record of efficiency, and an ample margin of safety, could break up in the air, completely, in any weather conditions. Such a thing has never happened in my experience and I've flown through weather as bad as it's possible to imagine. That it could happen three times within a few weeks introduces a coincidence factor no practical pilot would entertain."

"Very well. Let us say that it was not an accident. What is the alternative?"

"Sabotage, sir."

"You think these machines were tampered with on the ground before they took off?"

"That could be the answer, sir. I wouldn't know. Something could have happened in the air. There may not have been sabotage in the strict sense of the word; but there must have been interference of some sort, somewhere. Those machines were forced down." There was a stir round the table. The President frowned. "You seem very definite about it."

"I am, sir."

"Why?"

"You have asked for my opinion, sir, and I have given it to you."

"Have you anything in mind to support such an opinion?"

"Yes, sir. In the first place not one of these machines was on course when it disappeared."

"Are we sure of that?"

"Quite sure. Every inch of the routes has been searched. Had a machine, or the wreckage of one, been there, it would have been found. Experienced pilots, military or civil, don't lose their way on a straight run in fine weather. That three could do it in quick 6

succession would again be stretching coincidence beyond the point where I could accept it."

"You're rather fond of this word coincidence !"

"Only in the negative sense. It's because I don't trust coincidence that I consider it one of the governing factors of these disappearances. We meet it at every turn."

"How?"

"Was it coincidence that in every case the aircraft was carrying a Very Important Person—bearing in mind that other machines, without such persons on board, went through on schedule?"

"What you are saying is, you believe these machines were forced down on account of certain V.I.P.'s who were travelling in them."

"That is exactly what I am saying, sir."

"Do you think they could have been shot down?" "No, sir."

"Why not?"

"Because except for the unlikely event of the radio operator being hit by the first shot he would have flashed a signal saying what was happening. He would be on his very high frequency and in touch with control operators."

"What about a guided missile?"

Biggles smiled cynically. "No, sir. I know there have been demonstrations; but it's one thing to hit a pilotless aircraft flying low on a known, straight course; to hit a machine flying high on a course that has to be anticipated, or estimated, is a different matter. In any case, the employment of such a weapon, even if successful, would have resulted in the total loss, by fire, of the aircraft when-it crashed. Of what possible use, to the people responsible, could that be?"

"Well, by killing him. it would deny us the services of the specialist travelling in the machine."

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"If that was the object, why go to all the trouble? Surely it would be easier to kill him, or kidnap him, on the ground. It would be more advantageous to a potential enemy to have the man's portfolio undamaged. I assume it would contain documents of a secret nature." The President looked puzzled. "Can you think of any method, excluding guns, and direct sabotage, by which these machines could have been forced to land?" Biggles thought for a Moment. "I think there must have been two devices employed, sir. One would be necessary to take the machine off its course, and the other to bring it down. There has been talk of weapons that could do that—such as some sort of ray to cut the ignition system; but as far as I know they have yet to be invented. It's a possibility that can't be entirely ruled out. There has also been talk of causing an aircraft to fly into an area of lethal gas, with fatal results to the crew, or the power units, which rely on air for combustion. This, of course, is only surmise. But I can't forget that the lost machines were four-engined types that could climb on three engines and hold their altitude on two. Are we to believe that on three separate occasions four engines could cut out simultaneously—by accident?"

"Your theory would require the height and course of the machine to be known."

"Anyone with very high frequency radio might learn that because the

operator in the aircraft would from time to time report his position. But that would not be vital to the scheme. A machine might be made to fly into a trap by interference with its compass. That is possible, and I suspect it happened, for I can think of no other reason why three experienced pilots should be off course. They couldn't have left Africa so they 8

must still be there—unless they were burnt or otherwise destroyed to get rid of them. The people responsible would hardly want the machines. I fancy they wanted what was in them. They carried nothing of intrinsic value. The last machine carried only the personal luggage of the travellers."

"A project on such a scale could hardly be handled by an individual."

"That's why I believe it to be the work of a potential enemy." A parliamentary representative looked incredulous. "Are you suggesting that a foreign government has established a secret base in Africa?"

"Why not?"

"That's a serious allegation."

"I can think of foreign governments that have done more serious things." The President resumed. "What do you suppose has happened to the passengers?"

"Unless they were murdered in cold blood after they landed, which seems unlikely, they are still alive. I have given you my reasons why I think the machines were forced to land as opposed to being crashed."

"But could they have landed?"

"If my theory is correct the action that forced them down would have taken place within gliding distance of a possible landing ground. Having got down, the crews and passengers, not suspecting foul play, wouldn't attempt to hide. They would assume anyone they met to be friendly; which, I think, was not the case. Suspecting what I do, I'd behave differently."

"Before that could happen you'd have to find the place," observed a member, cynically. "That might be a difficult, but not impossible undertaking," returned Biggles evenly. The President looked doubtful. "Assuming this base

exists. can you think of any way you might locate it, bearing in mind the nature of the country, particularly on the West Coast route?"

"It won't be observable from the air, we may be sure of that," answered Biggles. "My first step would be to confirm that the machines were not off course through the inefficiency or negligence of the crews."

"How would you do that?"

"If I am to undertake a search, sir, I'd prefer not to discuss the technical aspect of it outside my Operations Room."

"There seems to be some risk of your running into the same trap as the lost machines."

"Possibly, sir. but there would be this difference." Biggles smiled faintly. "I'd know I was running into trouble. The lost pilots did not."

"That knowledge might not save you."

"Perhaps not. But I should see to it that someone knew where I was going." There was a pause, and a rather uncomfortable silence. The President looked round the table. He cleared his throat. "Well, gentlemen, that seems to be as far as we can get for the moment," he observed. "As Inspector Bigglesworth has such strong views on the matter under discussion I suggest we adjourn the conference until he is able to produce concrete evidence to support his opinion. Has anyone anything more to say?" There was no answer.

"Very well," said the President, rising. "Let us leave it at that. Air-Commodore Raymond will, no doubt, let us know of any development."

Lighting a cigarette Biggles walked slowly back to his office, where he found Algy, Bertie and Ginger, waiting for him. They looked up expectantly. "Well, how did it go?" asked Ginger.

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"Much as I expected," replied Biggles, dropping into a chair. "I was up against the old snag of trying to make people believe what they didn't want to believe. I fancy they were hoping I'd say the machines got off their course by accident, because any alternative sets an even stickier problem; one they'd rather dodge—at least, the political people."

"You mean the international angle," murmured Algy.

"Yes. In the circumstances they could only adjourn the meeting until I dig out something solid to support my theory."

"How much did you tell 'em, old boy," asked Bertie.

"No more than I could help, you may be sure. Politicians are no more discreet in their nattering than anyone else."

"I take it this means we're going to Africa," put in Ginger.

"We -shan't find these machines anywhere else. Frankly, I hope my theory's wrong, because if it's right, before we've finished bullets are likely to be flying."

"That's top-hole, old boy," observed Bertie cheerfully. "We've been shot at before."

"It isn't the thought of being shot that worries me," returned Biggles. "It's the stink that certain people will kick up if we happen to shoot somebody,"

"Stinks never killed anybody," asserted Algy. "Let's wait till we've got a corpse on our hands before we start sniffing."

The door opened and the Air-Commodore walked in. Looking at Biggles half reproachfully he remarked: "I'm afraid you've started something."

"I don't see that you've anything to be afraid of,

sir," returned Biggles. "I'm the one who'll get the dirty 11

end of the stick if we find ourselves in the mud. Moreover, I haven't started anything. It was the saboteur who scuppered the machines who pushed the starter."

"All right. How are you going to find him? I wasn't happy to hear you commit yourself to that."

"Nobody was happy. The conference was scared stiff. Because why? Because they knew thundering well I was right. Some of 'em don't want these machines found for fear of an international rumpus. That's why I wouldn't tell 'em how I was going to do it. I could have said a lot more than I did."

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me."

"Fair enough, sir. This talk of a secret base. I glossed over it because I don't believe it. A base is static. The thing that's causing the mischief is mobile. I say that for this reason. The first two machines were lost on or near the East Coast route. We can forget them. The trail's stone cold. The last machine went down in West Africa. If the same device was used it must have been moved there—unless the enemy has got bases all over the place, which I can't believe, or native rumours would have reached the ears of district officers. Make a note that if this secret weapon is mobile we can expect the racket to continue. Let's have another look at the last case." Biggles got up and went over to the wall map.

"A high-ranking American general, with his assistants, who had been over the Far and Middle East looking for military bases, was at Aden when he had an urgent call to return to America for a conference. He decided that the quickest way he could get there was to fly across Africa to Dakar, from where he could catch the regular U.S. service home via the Azores. We laid on a machine for him, the route being Khartoum—Kano—Dakar. The aircraft was on schedule as far as Kano in Nigeria but it never got to Dakar. Somewhere on that section it got off course, which means that it could be in Nigeria, French West Africa, Dahomey, Sierra Leone or Liberia—all nice countries to get lost in. Word of this trip was reported in the press. In the aircraft were not only the general and his staff but portfolios containing the results of conferences and investigations over half the world. A nice prize for a potential enemy to pick up. If the machine and everything in it was burnt up in a crash it would be tough on the general; but if those documents fell into the wrong hands it could be tough on a lot of people. Wherefore the enemy would go to some trouble to get them. That's how I see it. It isn't likely to end there. With half the statesmen, generals, scientists and what have you, tearing round the world in aircraft, it's only a question of time before it happens again—

unless we can stop the rot."

"Go on," requested the Air-Commodore. "At the meeting, you suggested you might be able to find the missing machine."

"If we act fast we might find the device that brought it down, which is more important; it might still be hiding where it last went into action, waiting for fresh orders."

"How would you go about it?"



"There's another V.I.P. hurrying home from the Far East to attend the same conference in Washington. He will take the same route."

"I didn't know that."

Biggles smiled. "Neither did I until a few minutes ago. Maybe I'm flattering myself, but on this occasion I shall be the V.I.P. And in case the enemy should feel that I'm not important enough to bother about we'd better dig up a more impressive rank and name. I shall fly the machine myself and the only passenger will be Ginger." 13

"What do you hope to gain by that?"

"Some information. In addition to the usual compass I shall have another, heavily insulated in lead. That will enable me to keep a check on the standard instrument. Should that start to deviate I shall know that the enemy is on the job. That alone would confirm that the missing machines were not lost by accident but by deliberate design."

"Then what?"

"I'd follow the course as indicated by the standard compass. That should give me a line on the course taken by the lost Hastings. In fact, in following that course I might see it—

or what's left of it."

"That would be taking a risk of disappearing yourself."

"If I failed to follow that course the people operating the device, whatever that might be, would smell a rat—guess their racket, had been rumbled."

"What machine are you going to use for this experiment?" the Air-Commodore wanted to know.

"The lost aircraft was a Hastings Mark IV of Transport Command, specially designed with all the trimmings for V.I.P.s. They have some more. We'd better borrow one—if you can manage it."

"They'll take a dim view of that. Having lost one they'll take an even dimmer view if they lose another."

"So shall I," declared Biggles. "But it's no use fiddling with a job of this size. We should be wasting our time if we tried to kid the enemy that a V.I.P. and his staff were risking their precious necks crossing Africa

in an obsolete kite."

"You'll need a lot of room to put a Hastings on the carpet—should it come to that."

"For reasons I've already explained there should be room. The people working this set-up can't be interested in making bonfires of aircraft. When they want a 14

V.I.P. they want him whole, not in bits and pieces scattered over the landscape. I'm willing to stake my neck on that."

"All right. I'll see what I can do."

"You might point out to the Ministry that apart from the machine I'm hoping to find two of their best pilots. Blokes like Tony Wragg and Vic Roberts, with ten thousand or more hours logged, are not to be picked up in the gutter outside the Air House." The Air-Commodore smiled lugubriously. "I'll try it," he consented. "But for heaven's sake be careful what you get up to."

"In this case it's nacre likely to be what I get down to," answered Biggles.

"Either way, up or, down, be careful."

Biggles sighed. "I'm always careful, sir. You know that. Why do you suppose I'm still alive?"

"I sometimes wonder," said The Air-Commodore, soberly, and went out.

"Now let's get down to work," Biggles told the others, briskly. FIVE DAYS after the conference, a Hastings aircraft, after refuelling, took off from the parched airfield at Kano and, climbing steadily for height, took up a course for Dakar, the great air junction in French Senegal on the West Coast of Africa. Biggles was at the controls. Ginger occupied the second pilot's seat beside him. There was no one else. This was, of course, the vital stage of Biggles's hastily prepared plan to locate the missing Hastings, now known as Operation Lex. The Air-Commodore had managed to get the aircraft Biggles wanted. He had also arranged for a communique to appear in the press to the effect that Colonel Rayle, one of Britain's leading military engineers, was on his way from the Middle East to America, via Dakar, to attend a United Nations meeting at Washington.

After working day and night to get his plan cut and dried Biggles had rushed the aircraft out to Egypt by the Mediterranean route hoping to arrive in the danger area before the enemy operatives, who were, he was convinced, behind the mystery, departed for fresh fields of activity. The only thing carried by the Hastings outside its normal equipment was an insulated compass, detachable so that it could be jettisoned to prevent it from being seen by the unknown enemy

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should the aircraft fall into his hands. Both Biggles and Ginger wore seat type parachutes. Beside Ginger was a canvas holdall containing, among other things, a special high-frequency walkie-talkie radio unit designed for the use of Intelligence agents. The only weapons carried were small automatics. Aware that he might fall into hostile hands, in which case he would be searched, Biggles had strapped his to his calf with adhesive tape.

Somewhere behind the Hastings, flying high, occasionally making contact by code radio, was the old Air Police Halifax, in the hands of Algy and Bertie. They were an essential part of the scheme, and their job, by no means an easy one, was to keep in touch with the Hastings without this being apparent to possible watchers on the ground. Actually, this was the weak link in the plan, and they all knew it. Should the Halifax come too close it would look suspicious; on the other hand, to remain at too great a distance might easily result in losing touch with its consort; for radio contact, even in code, would have to be kept to the absolute minimum. There was no way out of this difficulty. No arrangements had been made beyond the point of the Hastings being forced down, should that happen, for the simple reason that the next move would depend entirely on the circumstances in which this occurred.

Let it not be supposed that Biggles was anxious to be forced down, although he knew he was inviting trouble and realized that this might well happen. He would, he had said, avoid it, if it was possible to do that without exposing his purpose to the enemy and thus putting him on his guard. His immediate concern was to confirm that the missing Hastings had not drifted off course by accident. If he could also ascertain the direction it had taken so much the better. The

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two compasses should answer these problems. Having proved, or disproved his theory, the next step would have to be considered. If he

went down Algy would know, and thereafter use his discretion in the matter of following him up. The dangers of the operation were plain to see. First, there was the possibility of structural failure in the air, due to sabotage, causing the machine to fall out of control. Hence the parachutes. Secondly, the Hastings was a big machine, and to put it on the ground outside an airfield without a crack-up would be a hazardous business. Finally, should these perils be overcome there would be the unknown quantity waiting on the ground.

In the matter of landing, the aircraft would need a run of well over a thousand yards, and the chances of finding such a place, in nature, free from obstructions, was remote. Biggles's only consolation was, the enemy must be aware of that and make provision for it. His scheme rested on the assumption that this was the case, otherwise a bad crash was inevitable. Emergency airstrips there were, in Africa, Biggles knew. Many had been put down during the war when men and materials from the U.S.A. were being flown from Dakar to the Middle East. Most of these, he imagined, would now be overgrown; but he had borrowed a wartime route map from the Air Ministry and memorized those that fell anywhere near his course. The others had done the same.

The Hastings, now at 8,000 feet, droned on at cruising speed across a sky in which there was not a vestige of a cloud. Below lay Africa, most of it in this area just as it was in the days when that intrepid explorer, Mungo Park, had set out, alone, to cross it on foot. Open sand, scrub, sparse timber, swamps and lakes, made up the panorama. Ahead and to the south

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lay the great equatorial rain forests, with the River Niger and its tributaries winding through them, looking for a way to the sea. Farther on were the more settled areas near the coast.

The next hour, Biggles thought, would provide the answer to the mystery, one way or another, for after that, over primeval forest, there could be no question of getting down. He was right, too, although with the great black mass of jungle spreading like a stain across his course he was just beginning to fear that his plan had misfired when it developed exactly as he had anticipated. The needle of the standard compass began to move, indicating a reading different from the insulated instrument.

"Here we go," he told Ginger. "This looks like it." Four eyes watched

the instrument panel, Biggles maintaining his course as shown by the standard compass. "By thunder !" he cried presently. "Where the deuce are they taking us? I expected a deviation, but nothing like this."

The insulated compass told Ginger that they had swung from a course slightly north of west to due south-west.

"I don't know what's going, to happen next but you'd better be ready to move fast," Biggles told him tersely, snatching glances at the terrain below. Ginger nodded.

Ten minutes passed.

"If we hold this course much longer we shall be in sight of the Atlantic," muttered Biggles. And at that moment the rev. counters began to fall back. The engines spluttered. Not one. Not two. But all of them.

"We've had it," announced Biggles grimly, his eyes scanning the ground with that anxiety known to every

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pilot faced with a forced landing over unfamiliar territory.

The four Bristol Hercules engines seemed to be choking. Biggles, now losing height, juggled with his throttles, but it made no difference.

"What's causing it?" asked Ginger, in a tense voice. "I haven't a clue. But as I have plenty of petrol something must be affecting the ignition."

Ginger's eyes went round the sky, perhaps seeking inspiration, for he hardly expected to see anything. Suddenly they stopped, saucerling. His body stiffened. "My gosh!" he exclaimed. "There's a machine coming down ahead of us !" Biggles looked. He stared. He would have said he knew every machine on wings, but this type was one unknown to him. "What do you make of it?" he asked.

"Nothing," answered Ginger. "I don't know it. Do you think it has anything to do with what's happening?"

"Yes. Don't ask me how. The force must be strong, which means close, to affect the engines like this. I've got to go down. Warn Algy in the code. Make it quick, and brief." Ginger, moving fast, complied.

Biggles, grim-faced and tight-lipped, losing height, began to circle, looking for the best place within gliding distance to get down. Whatever lay below he had to go down. From his altitude, now, he had a range of five or six miles. '

Ginger, out of the corner of his eye, saw the unknown machine drifting nearer. It was a twin-engined, low-wing monoplane of medium size, able to carry six or eight passengers. It bore no identification marks, military or civil. Its general behaviour now was that of a dog shepherding a stray sheep.

Biggles, going on down, saw what he hoped to find.

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If it wasn't actually a landing strip it was at least a stretch of open ground. So close did it run to a broad belt of timber that he might have overlooked it had not his attention been drawn to a smudge of smoke at one end of it. Apart from the smoke there was no movement, no sign of life. In the ordinary way he would have taken the smoke for a native fire. But not now.

"They're showing us the ' way in," he muttered, concentrating on his approach, for without power, should he misjudge his distance, he would get no second chance. "You've given our position to Algy?" he went on, turning, his eyes still on the ground,

"Yes."

"Right. Get ready to chuck that compass overboard. Not now. They'd see it fall. Wait till I'm low over the trees."

"Okay."

"Get out of your brolly. You won't need it now. Take it with you or they'll know I had a passenger and look for you."

"I get it."

"This is the drill. I shall try to touch down well away from the smoke and finish broadside to the timber. As soon as we stop, jump to the trees and lie low. Never mind me. Watch which way they take me. As soon as things are quiet move off and try to contact Algy. You might find a flat patch big enough to bring him down although I didn't notice one within gliding distance."

"Okay." Ginger put his bag handy and made ready to move quickly. It was all part of the pre-arranged procedure should Biggles's plan work out—as, in fact, it had, so far. Biggles slipped off his last few hundred feet of height, straightened the machine—

skimmed the trees

—Ginger tossing the compass overboard—and presently flattened out over the strip of sun-dried grass. The wheels bumped gently, bumped again, settled, and the aircraft trundled on to the far end of the runway. At the last moment Biggles slewed round so that the exit was on the side nearest the trees.

"Watch your step," said Ginger anxiously, and jumped. He stumbled, recovered, and shot into the undergrowth like a hounded rabbit. A few yards back, and perhaps a score of paces from the Hastings, he turned and went flat to watch proceedings. In wondering what was going to happen next he was prepared for almost anything—except what did happen.

He was not surprised to see the unidentified plane coming in to land. That was to be expected and he paid little attention to it. He was more occupied with watching an open jeep that came racing along the side of the forest. There were six men piled in it. All carried rifles. That, too, was not unexpected. What shook him, and shook him to the core, was the fact that they were all black. Moreover, they wore uniforms, mostly green. One was smothered in gold braid.

In wide-eyed amazement he watched the jeep dry-skid to a stop by the Hastings and the crew leap out. This was so far outside his calculations—and Biggles's too, he imagined—

that he didn't know what to make of it. Not for a moment had it been supposed that they were dealing with anyone but white men. The first thought that crashed into his head was that they had made a major blunder. The whole scheme had come unstuck. They had landed at the wrong place. These, obviously, were French colonial troops of some sort on patrol.

He was soon to be disillusioned.

Biggles was standing by the nose of the machine casually lighting a cigarette. Whatever astonishment

he felt at this strange turn of events—and the shock must have been as severe to him as it was to Ginger—he didn't show it. Tossing the dead match aside he greeted the new arrivals with a cheerful nod.

The soldier in the gold braid, presumably the officer in charge of the party, strode up to him and addressed him in a manner so peremptory that Ginger frowned. His English, with a pronounced American accent, was fluent. "You're under arrest," he announced. Biggles's eyebrows went up. "Indeed? For what?"

"For landing on Liberian soil without a permit."

"How do you know I haven't a permit," asked, Biggles calmly.

"Because one hasn't been issued."

So that was it, thought Ginger swiftly. There had been a mistake. They were down in Liberia, the country on the West Coast of Africa that had been handed over to the negro slaves of America on their emancipation. He knew little about the country, and what he did know was not good. It was the blacks' own territory, and they could do what they liked in it without interference from outside. Most travellers kept clear of it, because the

"government", it was said, by making laws as it suited them, derived an income from fines imposed on visitors who appeared able to pay them. Nobody really knew what went on behind the scenes in the Black Republic. At least, that was how Ginger understood it. He imagined that Biggles would now be tried, fined, and on payment be allowed to go free. How wrong he was, was now revealed by the officer's next order.

"Tell Colonel Rayle to get out," he said, loudly.

Ginger could hardly believe his ears. How on earth could this overdressed popinjay know about their alleged passenger?

"Colonel Rayle?" inquired Biggles. "Who's he?" 23

This reply, casually given, seemed to take the man aback. He stared. He then went into the machine, and returned looking even more puzzled. "Are you by yourself?" he asked. Biggles smiled. "Looks like, it, doesn't it?" "You're the pilot?"

"Machines don't fly themselves."



The black's eyes half closed. "Smart guy, eh. Well, don't try your sass on me. What are you doing? Where are you going?"

"I was taking this machine to Dakar when all my engines suddenly died on me. Never saw such a thing, in my life. How far away am I from help?"

"Some way." Again the officer eyed Biggles suspiciously. "You sure you don't know nothin' about Colonel Rayle?"

"Never seen the man in my life. Why?"

"Nothin' . . . nothin'. You come with us." The man indicated the jeep. "Git aboard."

"What about my machine?"

"We'll take care of that."

Biggles shrugged. "If that's how you want it."

"It is. And I'll tell you something else, brother. Don't try to come back here by yourself because these woods ain't safe for white men. There's a lot of bad characters about who don't like 'em."

Biggles said no more. He boarded the jeep. The black crew followed, with the exception of two who remained behind. As the jeep started off down the side of the forest these took heavy knives from their belts, and cutting bunches of grass and small scrub threw the stuff on the upper surfaces of the Hastings with the obvious intention of hiding it from air observation. From time to time, Ginger noticed, they threw glances towards the forest. The reason for this, or so it seemed, became apparent when a black, practically naked but

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carrying a spear, appeared on the fringe some-distance away. For a moment he stood watching. The, men by the aircraft shouted something, whereupon he faded into the shadows, to be seen no more.

The blacks, their work finished, strode off, following the track of the jeep, leaving Ginger alone with the heat, the flies—and what else? He didn't know; which was, perhaps, just as well.

For a little while he sat on his brolly, considering what he had seen and trying to make sense out of it. At the same time he tried to

visualize the country around as he had last seen it from the air. At last, finding the insects a torment, he picked up his bag and started walking.

GINGER WAS RIGHT in assuming Biggles's astonishment

when he saw the colour of the occupants of the jeep. No other thought occurred to him than his plan had gone adrift, and either he had landed in the wrong place or by an offchance these black troops had arrived on the scene before the people responsible for the forced landing; for that he had been brought down by some unknown device was never in doubt. However, the mention of Colonel Rayle soon showed him which way the wind blew, although he was still at a loss' to find any connexion between these apparently ignorant Africans and the sinister service to which he was, or supposed himself, opposed. It certainly seemed impossible that they could be associated with the machines that had disappeared nearer the eastern side of the continent.

All he could do was hope that his captors, on finding him alone in the plane, would be as much at sea as himself; that they, too, would think they had made a mistake in attacking the wrong plane. What else could they think? he reasoned. Anyway, he was in no condition to argue. Nor, in fact, did he at this juncture want to escape. He had, after all, deliberately put himself in the position in which he now found himself. His assignment was to find out what was going on,

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and he would not be likely to do that by running away. As to his locality, he could well believe that he was in the hinterland of Liberia. Certainly he was not in British territory, although Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast could not be far away. So he made no protest about getting into the jeep. His chief worry was Ginger, in view of the remark about bad characters in the bush, which might be a bluff or might equally well be true. It had obviously been made to deter him from attempting to escape. The airfield puzzled him, for it was hard to believe that a piece of open ground, quite free from obstructions, could occur naturally so close to heavy forest even though the bare patch was light sandy soil, as he could see it was. He could only conclude that the land had either been burnt off at some time by natives for purposes of cultivation, or else this was one of the emergency landing places provided during the war for pilots on the ferry service between America and Egypt. Any secondary growth that had started afterwards could easily be cut.

The jeep did not stop when it reached the far end of the airstrip but ran on over a rough track through sheer jungle for about half a mile before again entering open ground which was, he perceived at once, a large compound, fenced with barbed wire. Barbed wire! This astonished him. It also upset his theory, for he had convinced himself that he was looking for a mobile establishment. Wire suggested a permanent base, as did a number of huts, large and small, although they were built in the native style with native materials. One, of frame timber with a verandah, was large, and constructed with a gabled roof in European fashion. This, he supposed, was the headquarters, a belief that turned out to be correct when the jeep turned towards

it.

Biggles's eyes were busy. On the far side of the compound he noticed that a small piece had been partitioned off, also with barbed wire. There was a fair-sized hut in it. From this now appeared, as if attracted by the jeep's motor, several white men. Being some distance off Biggles couldn't see details, but they appeared to be, if not actually in rags, in a disreputable state. They came to the limit of their fence and stared at the jeep. One waved. Biggles waved back, his expression hardening, for it was clear that the men were prisoners.

His reconnaissance ended when the jeep stopped at the door of the long building, at the door of which stood a sentry. Here he was invited curtly to get down. Having no alternative he complied, promptly to find himself being searched, everything being taken from his pockets by the officer in charge of the party. Biggles had to get a grip on himself to submit to this, but the situation called not only for self-control but prudence. He protested as a matter of course. "What is the meaning of this outrage?" he asked indignantly.

The question was not answered, so he said no more, his real concern being for his gun, which was more likely to be found should he attempt to resist. As it was, to his satisfaction and relief, the searcher went no lower than his trousers pockets. This irritating ordeal over he was escorted into the building to find himself in a crudely furnished room of some size. At one end was a trestle table. Behind it, watching Biggles'

s entrance, sat a man, a negro. Conspicuous on the wall behind him was a picture, a cheap framed print. It was a portrait, a garish study of a black man in uniform; and into Biggles's eyes as he looked at it dawned the light of understanding, for he recognized the person portrayed. It was Christophe of Haiti, -sometimes called the Black

blooded negro, born a slave, he had by his own efforts raised himself to the position of Dictator on the great island in the West Indies once owned by France. The man sitting at the table apparently noticed Biggles's interest in the picture, for speaking fluently in a deep, husky voice, with a pronounced American drawl, he said: " You know him, huh?"

"I know of him," acknowledged Biggles.

"He was a great man!"

- "If his greatness is to be judged by the number of murders he committed, then he was a giant," stated Biggles, drily.

"He cleaned up dub place."

"And at the finish, very properly, he got cleaned up himself."

"De rats turned on him."

"Even rats got tired of being butchered in cold blood." The negro frowned. "Go steady, mister. You're talkin' about a relation of mine."

"I could see you were an admirer but I didn't realize it was a family matter."

"He was my great-great-granddad." Pride rode high in the negro's voice.

"I see," said Biggles, slowly, but thinking fast. "Have you inherited his ideas?"

"Could be."

Biggles made a quick appraisal of the man in front of him. He was about fifty, tall and powerfully built; but his expression was not that of a simple, native-born African. It conveyed too much self-confidence, and behind it, Biggles knew, was a personality to be reckoned with. It was significant that the man, instead of plastering himself with gold braid like his aide-de-camp, wore a plain linen boiler suit with no other decoration than five stars on the collar.

The next question he put to Biggles was: "Where is Colonel Rayle?"

"What's all this about Colonel Rayle?" demanded Biggles. "I've never seen him in my life." Which was perfectly true. "I must get-on," he added. "How far am I from the nearest British official?"

"A long way," was the reply, given smoothly. "Then I'd better be starting."

"I wouldn't advise you to do that, mister." "Why not?"

"These woods around here ain't safe for a white man."

"Can't you provide an escort? You seem to have plenty of troops." Actually, Biggles was in no immediate hurry to leave. He wanted to talk to the prisoners. But he thought it would look more natural if he expressed a wish to push on.

"Sorry, but I need my men here."

"Are we in Liberia?"

"Sure."

"And these troops I see about are Liberian soldiers?" "Wa'al, not exactly."

"What do you mean by that?"

"What I say. Take it easy here for a day or two till I've made some enquiries, then we'll have another chat, you and me. What's your name, stranger?"

"Bigglesworth." As Biggles's name was on the logbooks in the aircraft it would have been pointless; possibly dangerous, to prevaricate. He could see no reason to, anyway.

"Okay, Mr. Bigglesworth," concluded the negro, rising. "We'll talk again presently. Meanwhile you'll be with friends." He made a signal to the escort. Biggles was taken out and, as he hoped he would be, marched to the prisoners'

compound. A gate in the wire, where an armed sentry stood on duty, was<sup>30</sup>

opened, and closed behind him. A group of white men, who had been watching, converged on him. He knew only one of them. It was Wing Commander Tony Wragg, the chief pilot of the lost Hastings.

"Well, knock me sideways! It is Biggles," greeted Tony. "What the heck are you doing here? I thought you were in

"

Biggles silenced him with a gesture. "Not so loud," he warned. Tony nodded. "I get it. For my own sake I'm not sorry to see you. For your sake, I am."

"Where can we talk," asked Biggles.

"Come over here in the shade and for a start I'll introduce you to everybody. I'll give you a tip, too. He's not here at the moment, but with us is a chap named Hollweg—Bruno Hollweg. He says he's an Austrian. His tale is he's a naturalist. He was taking photos of wild life on the French frontier when he was picked up and brought in. We've reason to think he's a spy, put in to listen to our conversation—you know, the old German prisoner-of-war camp racket. Meet the gang."

Tony introduced in turn: General Homer Mander, US. Army, and his three secretaries. Then followed two members of the Hastings' crew: Sergeant Norton, navigator, and Corporal Penn, radio operator.

Biggles looked round. "Where's Vic Roberts, your second pilot? Isn't he with you?" There was a stiffening in the atmosphere. "No." "Why not?"

"He's dead. So's Laxton, my L.A.C. steward." "How did that happen?"

"They were speared to death trying to escape."

Biggles stared, his expression slowly changing from incredulity to horror. "You can't mean that," he protested.

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"It's true."

"But are you sure?"

"Quite sure. They showed us the bodies, presumably to discourage any further attempts to get away."

"That puts this business in a very different light," said Biggles grimly. "At least it sets our clock right in one respect. They've no intention of ever letting us go, knowing that we'd report the murders."

"Christophe didn't do the killing—oh no," sneered Tony. "He was

emphatic in pointing that out. Vic and Laxton were killed by wild men in the bush over whom he's no control—so he says. That's his tale, and how are you going to disprove it? It was these murders that pretty well confirmed that Hollweg isn't what he pretends to be. Vic was always suspicious of him. He was a prisoner-of-war in Germany and could smell a stooge a mile away. We made a hole under the wire. Vic was going to fetch help. Laxton offered to go with him. After dark they stripped, blackened themselves with charcoal to look like natives, and went out. Their bodies were brought back inside half an hour."

"Did Hollweg know what they were doing?"

"Yes. We tried to keep it from him but he spotted them blacking themselves at the last moment. He disappeared, and it was then, we reckon, that he squealed. He'd been seen talking to Christophe before that. Maybe he's only trying to ingratiate himself, but he's not to be trusted, anyway. Apart from the murders we haven't been badly treated, although our quarters are pretty grim and the grub's ghastly."

"Who's this Christophe? I take it he's the big boy I just saw over the way. Claims to be a descendant of Christophe of Haiti."

"That's right. Proud of it, too. Aims to set up his own empire in Africa."

"Does he say that?"

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"Too true he does. This set-up here is the nucleus." "Is this a personal matter or is the Liberian Government in it?"

"We think it's personal. The Liberian Government is a long way away and isn't what you'

d call strong. Of course, they must know that something's going on here but it'd be easier to leave it alone than tackle it. It isn't just a matter of the troops you see. There's no doubt that the tribes round about are in with Christophe."

General Mander stepped in. "Sure. That's right. Whether this fellow is a descendant of the Christophe or not, he's got big ideas. He could be. But of this I am sure. He was never born in Africa. He knows the States as well as I do. He knows a sight too much. He knew I was on that plane and he knew what I'd been doing. The way he grabbed my portfolios made that clear. In some way, I can't imagine how, this

whole idea is hooked up with the gathering of secret information."

Biggles shook his head. "That doesn't sound like a negro racket. Have you never seen white men around here?"

"Only Hollweg, and he's supposed to be a prisoner."

"Well, I'd say there are whites in this picture," averred Biggles. "They're using the blacks, and keeping under cover behind them. How did Christophe know about General Mander and the plane he was on? How did he know about me coming this way? Don't ask me to believe that a black upstart in the wildest part of Africa maintains a worldwide Intelligence Service. That's too much. Why did you land?"

"My engines died on me."

"Did you know you were off your course?" "Of course not—till I touched down here." 33

"You knew about two other machines disappearing?"

"Yes. But that happened nearer to the eastern route and I didn't associate them with my trouble. In fact, I didn't know what was happening until I was told I was a prisoner. Even then I thought I'd barged into Liberian red tape."

"Do you know what happened to the two other machines?"

"Christophe says he heard a rumour of two machines having engine trouble and trying to land. They both crashed and were burnt out. Christophe, of course, doesn't admit that he had anything to do with it."

"That's a grim tale—if it's true."

"I don't see why it shouldn't be. If the fellows, passengers and crews, had been taken prisoner, they'd probably be here with us. Why do you suppose they're keeping us here?"

"Goodness knows. Hostages, perhaps. Was there another machine in the air near when your engines cut?"

"Yes. It's here. We often hear it and occasionally see it."

"What do you make of it?"

"Nothing. I fancy it's a prototype of some sort." "Ever seen the pilot?"



"No."

"Have you any idea at all what made your engines cut?"

"Not a clue. Admittedly the trouble came out of the blue, but I didn't really grasp what was happening until I was looking for somewhere to get down."

"You didn't manage to send out an S.O.S.?"

"No. Corporal Penn, like me, suddenly realized we were off course, but before we could do anything about fixing our position we were on the floor. We realize 34

now that something was wrong with the compass. Do you know what made your engines cut?"

Biggles shook his head. "No. But I do know this. The anti-aircraft device that's being used here was never the invention of a coloured man. How did Christophe get hold of it?

That isn't the only question. What's he using for money to pay these fancy troops of his?

He may be ambitious, but ambition alone isn't enough to support a racket of this size. There's somebody more powerful than Christophe behind it."

"If this is a new skirmish in the Cold War I can understand why the enemy wanted to get hold of General Mander; but why did they want you?" queried Tony. "What were you doing in this part of the world, anyway?"

"Taking a Hastings to Dakar."

"Carrying anything or anyone of importance?"

Biggles smiled. "Nothing more important than myself. As a matter of fact, chum, strictly between ourselves, I was looking for you. Which reminds me. What happened to your machine? I didn't see it as I came in."

"I don't know. We left it where I landed. We were brought here and haven't been out since. Vic was hoping to find it, and get away in it."

"Well, it isn't on the airfield now."

"Then they must have moved it. They've got a pilot, so why not? They wouldn't be likely to leave it in the open for a search machine to spot."

At this juncture General Mander, who had been standing close, stepped into the conversation. Taking Biggles by the arm he said quietly : "Come over here a minute. I'd like to speak to you alone."

With Biggles wondering what was coming they walked clear of the group, when the General went on : "When we saw them bringing you along in the jeep 35

Wragg recognized you, and he said, 'that's Bigglesworth of the Special Air Police'."

"Was Hollweg present when he said that?" asked Biggles, quickly. The General thought for a moment. "I don't remember seeing him. He could have been. But tell me this. Do I understand from your conversation with Wragg that you are a British Security Officer?"

"I am."

"Investigating this business?"

"Yes, although for obvious reasons I wouldn't care for that to be known here. If it got to Christophe's ears my investigations would end abruptly."

"I guess you're right, at that," said the General, seriously.

"Had you some special reason for asking?"

"Very much so. You've taken me into your confidence, now I'll take you into mine. I've said nothing to the others because being top secret I couldn't spread it around. You're different, and in view of what you're doing I reckon you ought to know what I'm going to tell you, When I left the States a year ago our top scientists and engineers were experimenting with a new device—use the old hackneyed phrase secret weapon if you like—that would alter a ship's course and, when necessary, cut its motors dead. At that time it would only work from very close quarters; but it was a start, and there seemed no reason why the range shouldn't be lengthened. You see what I'm driving at?"

"I do indeed," answered Biggles. "It explains a lot. Thanks for telling me. I take it you believe that Christophe has somehow got his hands on the new weapon and is using it for his own ends."

"I figure it like this. He certainly didn't invent it. And if Iron Curtain spies had gotten it—

well, it wouldn't be here. Crazy though it seems, this guy

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Christophe must have got his hands on it and aims to use it to set up a black empire of his own. One of my secretaries is new out from home. He may know more about it. I'll ask him. But here comes Hollweg. He doesn't talk much but he listens plenty. We'd better get back to the others."

"Have you or your staff any weapons between you?" asked Biggles, as they strolled towards the group. "Sooner or later this business will come to a showdown and I'd better know how you stand."

"Not one. Have you?"

"I've a gun."

"How come they didn't take it off you? I reckon you were frisked."

"I was, but they didn't find it."

The General looked at Biggles curiously. "Say, that was real smart of you." They walked on.

Biggles now had a good look at the alleged Austrian naturalist who was standing, hands in pockets, not with the group but a little way off as if he realized he was not popular. Yet, Biggles noticed, he was near enough to hear the conversation. He was a black bearded, black haired, little man of perhaps forty, with a permanent expression that was almost a smile; but a lack of humour in his eyes suggested that this was more forced than natural. He could have been an Austrian. But, for that matter, reflected Biggles, he could have been almost anything. He could well understand Vic Roberts being suspicious of him. - He wouldn't have trusted the fellow a yard. Where had he come from? Had he, Biggles wondered uneasily, been within earshot when Tony had made his unfortunate but natural remark about the Air Police?

Almost as if to answer his question two members of

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his recent escort came striding purposefully towards the prisoners' pen. Cried one: "Dat new man Biggsfort. De General he want talk to youse."

Biggles looked hard at the speaker. It struck him as significant that so many of these blacks should be able to speak English. As he turned away from the General to obey the order he remarked, softly : "If Christophe didn't bring this bunch with him from the States they must be Kroo boys from the coast, where they'd pick up the language loading and unloading ships."

The General nodded grimly. "Bad lot wherever he got 'em. Watch how you go."

"I'll watch," promised Biggles.

As SOON as Biggles saw Christophe's face he knew from the expression on it that something had happened; that his attitude had changed; so he prepared himself for what he suspected was going to be a difficult session.

Christophe's first words confirmed his surmise.

"Come right in—copper," ordered the negro. He spoke quietly, smoothly, with a hint of a sneer, and a slight emphasis on the last word.

Biggles didn't answer. So Hollweg had heard, and betrayed him, was the thought that flashed through his mind. The interview looked like being even more awkward than he had expected.

"If you figure you're wise you're fooling yourself," drawled Christophe. "You weren't wise to come here."

Biggles, old campaigner that he was, knew that in a clash, mental or physical, the man who first relinquishes the initiative is already half-way to defeat. Wherefore, even in the present circumstances, he was determined not to yield an inch of ground. "Before you start patting yourself on the back you'd better have a good look at yourself and see how wise you are," he returned evenly. "Mind if I sit down?" Without waiting for an answer he pulled forward a chair, sat on it, took a cigarette from his case, which still lay on the 39

table, and lit it. "Go ahead," he invited. "I presume you have something to say."

"Smart guy, eh," sneered Christophe.

"Let's not waste time tossing bouquets to each other," suggested Biggles. "This isn't a question of being smart. It's a matter of common sense. If anyone is behaving like a fool it's you, for supposing you can get away with what you're doing here. You say I'm a copper. Okay. Let's agree you're right. That means I was sent here to give this joint of yours the once-over. That, in turn, means several people—too big for you to handle—

know I'm here. Wherefore, I say, before doing anything in a hurry let's have a look at the picture from both angles, yours and mine."

Biggles paused to let his words sink in. He could see from Christophe's face that they had not been without effect. "By the way, who told you I was a police officer?" he inquired.

"A little birdie."

"Hollweg."

Christophe looked surprised. "How would he, know?"

Biggles realized he had played a wrong card. Christophe sounded genuine. "It was just an idea. He looks the sort of guy who would spot a policeman, just as I've a nose that can smell a crook. Who was it?"

"I've got pals."

Biggles smiled. "So have I. Let's call it quits on that score." Christophe scowled. "Quits nothing. I'm the boss."

"For the moment, maybe. We needn't argue about that. Let's get down to brass tacks. My friends over the way tell me you plan to set up a black empire here. I gather you told them."

"Sure I told them. It ain't no secret. What's wrong with that?" 40

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Go right ahead, if you're big enough and go the right way about it. London is full of people who think they ought to be running empires. They stand up and say so. Nobody stops 'em — while they stay on the right side of the law. That's the point. It's when people start making laws to suit themselves that the ship starts to rock. Hitler found that out. So did Mussolini. So did your great-granddad. But they all found it out too late. You're heading for the same rocks. Carry on for your empire; but you won't get it by

interfering with other people's property. That's sound advice. Think it over." Christophe regarded Biggles with a curious expression on his face. "I don't need your advice," he announced. "What I want to know is, where's Colonel -Rayle?"

"Who told you about him?"

"Didn't I say I had pals outside?"

"They're not so wise, either," said Biggles evenly. "Incidentally, they'll finish by taking you to the cleaners. There isn't any Colonel Rayle."

Christophe stared, his dark eyes smouldering.

Biggles stubbed his cigarette and took another. "I created him in order to find my way here. I knew the moment you monkeyed with my compass. So did other people, because I was being watched. Now we both know how we stand how about you telling me who's behind this racket."

"Nobody. I'm the boss""You said that before. And I believe that's what you think. But you're wrong. I don't know—yet---who your friends are although I've a pretty good idea; but if you think they'

ll let you get away with this you're a fool. Frankly, as I don't think you are a fool, why not come clean so that we can get this crazy business tidied up? You can't win, the way you're going on."

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Christophe glared. "Who says I can't?"

"I do. Surely your own common sense tells you that you can't fight the British Empire plus the United States."

"What can they do? This is Liberia, a free country, and anyone trying to grab it is liable to start something."

"But that's what you're trying to do yourself—grab it," Biggles pointed out. "You've already started something."

"Sure I have, and what I start I finish," snarled Christophe. Biggles, realizing that he had pushed his point a little too hard, shook his head sadly. "Have it your own way," he said quietly. The trouble was. he thought, Christophe knew he was telling the truth, and didn't like the look of it.

At this juncture a black came into the room and put a piece of paper in front of Christophe, who read the message. And as he read it his expression changed again. His dark eyes switched to Biggles's face. "Seems like my pals outside know about you," he remarked.

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"They're sending somebody to have a little talk with you. mister."

"Don't forget that my pals will soon be along to have a little talk with you," returned Biggles drily.

There was a further interruption when another man came in carrying a bundle. It was Ginger's parachute. Throwing it on the floor, with eloquent gestures he rattled out something in a language unknown to Biggles.

Christophe's expression hardened. "Who was in that plane with you?" he demanded harshly.

"A friend of mine."

"Where's he gone?"

"Home, I hope, to tell my chief where I am, and why." This seemed to break the control Christophe had so far exerted on himself. He sprang to his feet, mouthing : "If it wasn't for somebody coming to see you I'd fix you right now. But it can wait. It won't be for long. You try to get away from here and it'll come to the same thing."

"I don't know that I'm in all that hurry to get away," replied Biggles coolly. "I want to see what's going on. In particular I shall be interested to see this pal of yours." Christophe sank back. Something in Biggles's manner seemed to take the venom out of him. At any rate he resumed his earlier demeanour. He looked at Biggles With halfclosed eyes. "Your friend has killed a man. Shot him."

"He must have had a good reason."

"That's murder."

"So you say. Murder's a subject you probably know more about than I do."

"You know what it means here to kill a man?"

"I know what it means in civilization. So will you, one day."

"The rest of the tribe'll be thirsting for your blood."

"I shall do my best to see that they stay thirsty."

Christophe may have felt that his arguments were getting him nowhere, for he signalled to the escort to take Biggles away. He tried one last shot,. "My pals outside seem to know you plenty."

"They'll know me even better by the time I've finished here."

"They seemed tickled to death when I told 'em your name."

"It's flattering to know I'm so well known," murmured Biggles, and went out. 43

He was returned to the wire enclosure well satisfied with the interrogation, which had, he thought, told him more than he expected. He went over to Tony Wragg and General Mander who were talking together. "These people must have got private radio; they're in touch with outside; do you know where the equipment is housed?" Tony pointed to a hut some distance away. "On still nights I've heard an engine running over there. Once, when the door was open, I thought I heard Morse coming through." Biggles nodded. "Queer business. I still don't quite get the hang of it, but of this I'm certain : Christophe is playing his own game. He's getting assistance from outside. If I'm right in that then the people outside must be playing their own game, too. Which means that sooner or later one side will double-cross the other. Christophe is interested in himself. If, as I suspect, the Iron Curtain brigade are supporting him, that will only last as long as it suits them. Keep that in mind should anything happen to me." Tony started. "Are you expecting anything to happen to you?"

"Yes. Christophe is a bit sore. He knows I'm a copper. He said he'd bump me off right away but for the fact that some of his outside pals want to have a word with me." Tony looked upset. "Did that snooper Hollweg repeat what I

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"He could have squealed, but I fancy Christophe got the gen over the radio when he reported that I'd arrived here. Anyway, he's rattled. Now I'm waiting for his pals to arrive, and their intentions, I fancy, will not be of the best."

"The aircraft went off while you were in with Christophe." 44



"I heard it."

"It may have gone to fetch these so-called pals."

"That's how I'd worked it out. I'd better tell you this—in case. Keep it under your hats, but I'm not alone on this job. Three of my boys are around. One shouldn't be far away, and two more, with a Halifax, should be in the offing. By gosh! It's hot. I must get a drink." Biggles walked towards the water tank.

General Mander followed him. "I've got a bit of news for you," he said quietly. "In one way it throws light on this business, but in another it makes it more puzzling." Biggles took a drink from the tin mug provided for the purpose. "Sounds interesting, anyhow."

"After you'd gone over to Christophe an idea struck me. One of my secretaries, Al Cox, is really a security officer. He only joined me recently. He was in the States up till a month ago, so knowing he'd know about it I asked him what was the latest news of the secret weapon I told you about. He knocked me flat by telling me that the whole outfit had been stolen—not only the instrument but the special plane that had been designed to carry it."

Biggles stared incredulously. "The plane, too. How could that happen?" The General made a gesture of resignation. "How do these things happen? How do the tightest secrets leak out? I needn't tell you. It seems that the plane was standing on the airfield ready for a test flight when one of the aircraft hands, a coloured man, jumped the cockpit and flew it off. It hasn't been seen since."

For a moment Biggles was at a loss for words. "Then that must be the plane Christophe is using here!"

"That's how I figured it, because if Russia had got the ship we should have known about it by now through our agents. Even if the ship went behind the 45

Iron Curtain, and a copy was made, it wouldn't be likely to get into the hands of a black adventurer like Christophe. Unless we're up against a fantastic coincidence Christophe was the man who stole the ship."

"The name of the black mechanic would be known, of course."

"It was. His name, as shown on the squadron books, was Dessalines. Think that one over

!"

"Dessalines—Dessalines--that name rings a -bell," muttered Biggles. "Hadn't he something to do with Haiti, where, according to Christophe, his ancestor was Emperor?"

"The man who called himself Emperor Dessalines was the negro slave who led the revolt against the French in Haiti a hundred and fifty years ago. Dessalines was actually the name of his master, a French planter—Jean Jacques Dessalines. The new boss called himself Emperor Jean Jacques I. He didn't last long. He was bumped off by Christophe, who succeeded him, and turned out to be an even more unspeakable thug than the man he had murdered."

"Where does that get us?" murmured Biggles. "The man who pinched the plane was Dessalines. This fellow here calls himself Christophe. Are there two of 'em in this racket or are they one and the same man?"

"That's something I can't answer," returned the General. "If Christophe can pilot a plane then he may be Dessalines. If he can't, then the Dessalines who stole the ship may be the man who's flying it now. That means there's two of 'em in it. Maybe they got together and decided to follow their ancestors in the empire business by grabbing one of the most valuable weapons in the world."

"They couldn't do that on their own," declared

Biggles. "They had someone to help 'em. They still

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have. Christophe admits that. The question -arises, what are these pals hoping to get out of it?"

"I guess they wanted the weapon."

"And now Christophe's holding out on 'em. If that's right he must be crazy."

"He's not doing so badly," the General pointed out. "The documents he's got so far would be worth millions behind the Iron Curtain. I'd say he's selling them and using the money to build up his army here."

"That could be the explanation," conceded Biggles pensively. "If it is, then Christophe won't last long. What his so-called pals want is the weapon, and sooner or later they'll get it. The wonder is they haven't

got it already."

"That may not be as easy as it sounds," opined the General. "Don't forget the woods round this' outfit are crawling with blacks in Christophe's pay. A Black Curtain against the Iron Curtain, as you might say. The only way anyone, even a Soviet agent, could get in, would be by air. And with his weapon Christophe has control of the air. I don't think it would worry the States if the weapon was destroyed. They'd have blueprints for another. But if it should fall into enemy hands—that would be a different matter. This is the worst crack we've had since we lost the atom bomb."

"Yes," said Biggles slowly. "You're sure about these blacks in the forest."

"We've seen 'em. The chiefs, or witch-doctors, come in sometimes for pay or rations."

"Do they carry rifles?"

"Haven't seen any. Mebbe Christophe, not trusting 'em, would draw the line at that."

"Hm." Biggles was thinking of Ginger, out there in the "woods". with natives whose orders seemed to be to kill any white men they met. The parachute had told Christophe that there had been a second person

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in the machine. A native, it was said, had been shot. That could only mean that Ginger had been in collision with the blacks. They, too, would know he was in the district. He had not been caught so far, reasoned Biggles, or Christophe would have boasted of it. All the same, it was clear that Ginger's position was perilous in the extreme, and Biggles regretted bitterly that he had landed him in it. But then, when the plan was made, he could not by any stretch of the imagination have foreseen the situation that had arisen. He was still pondering the position, wondering what he could do about it, when the unknown aircraft glided overhead towards the airstrip, across a sky now pink with the glow of sunset.

"I reckon that's about the only way anyone could get in here," averred the General. "If Christophe's got the Liberian Government on his payroll, which wouldn't be difficult, no one could get into this country on foot without a permit—and that wouldn't be forthcoming."

"That's what it looks like," replied Biggles, watching the jeep go out. "Thanks, General, for what you've told me. It clears the air a lot. It's a relief to know the secret weapon is here, and not behind the Iron Curtain. My job now is to stop it getting there. If . . ." he broke off, staring hard at the returning jeep.

In it were two white men who had apparently just arrived in the plane. He knew them both, and was not particularly surprised to see them there. They were Iron Curtain agents. One, when he had been in collision with him in the West Indies, he had known as Zorotov.\* The other was his old enemy, Erich von Stalhein, one-time of the German Secret Service. So these, Biggles pondered, were Christophe's, "pals".

"Friends of yours?" queried the General, looking at Biggles's face.

"I wouldn't exactly call them friends," returned Biggles, drily. "In fact, those two birds dislike me so much for more than once pulling out their tail feathers that you may have to finish this business without me."

GINGER HAD BEEN CONTENT to leave Biggles to take care

of himself, at any rate for the time being, feeling sure that the place to which he was being taken could not be far from the airstrip. What had happened was in accord with the plan, and an attempt at this juncture to follow the jeep might do more harm than good. That could be tackled when it became necessary. The important thing at the moment was to get in touch with the Halifax to let Algy and Bertie know what had happened. This was the arrangement, and it was for this reason that he had encumbered himself with the radio.

The ideal thing now was to find a place near at hand where the Halifax could get down, but that was rather a lot to hope for. There was, of course, no question of it using the airstrip. If a landing ground could not be found he would be faced with the laborious task of sending a radio message in code. In any case he would have to use the radio to make contact, so realizing that Algy might be calling him he decided that the sooner he got the set functioning, the better. There was always a hope that Algy himself might find somewhere to land.

Already two snags had appeared in the programme, the first being the locality—Liberia. With the world

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simmering with political tension any interference with a sovereign

state would be bound to raise what Biggles had called a stink. This threw them on their own resources. Only in dire extremity would the British government come to their assistance. The second snag was the alleged presence in the district of hostile blacks. It seemed to Ginger that there was something wrong about this. Wild animals were to be expected in what was well known to be big game country: but not wild natives. Leaving aside the unsettled tribes in the Mau-Mau district of East Africa it was news to Ginger that such conditions persisted anywhere in Africa. There were now few Africans who had not been in touch with white men, and co-operation rather than open hostility was the general rule. Natives there certainly were, not far away, for one had shown himself. Why should they be dangerous? What had they to gain from murder? No, thought Ginger, there was something phoney about that. True, the man he had seen had carried a spear; but in big game country that was natural. Most people, black or white, would carry a weapon of some sort. Ginger decided he would believe the story of active hostility when he had proof of it. All the same, common sense dictated a policy of caution. If he could avoid being seen he would.

The atmosphere under the trees was hot and heavy. Fortunately, the trees being big, the tops concealing the sky, there was little undergrowth, so the going was not too difficult. He reckoned he had not more than half a mile to go to reach open ground on the far side of the belt of timber—he had not dared to show himself on the airstrip, of course. Twice, as he pressed on, he heard the distant drone of an aircraft which he thought must be the Halifax looking for him, for a smoke signal, or waiting to hear from him. The canopy of leaves prevented him from seeing it : which was why

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he was so anxious to reach the more or less open plain which he remembered seeing from the air.

The matter was urgent, because Algy had been told, should he lose touch, not to hang about too long at a stretch because the continued presence of the Halifax could hardly fail to arouse the suspicions of the enemy who, guessing what it was doing, might bring it down.

It was in silence that Ginger reached the scrub that fringed the forest. A few big trees straggled out into it, but then gave way to the common African plain scenery of dry grass dotted with anthills and occasional clumps of flat-topped acacia. The sun blazed down. Nothing moved. There was not a sound. The forest might have been dead. Mopping his

streaming face he made a final survey of the landscape, after which, seeing nothing of interest, he squatted on the bulging root of a great tree and began to unpack his equipment.

He was assembling the radio when he was startled into confusion by a sudden rush and scurry close at hand. He half rose, snatching out his gun, only to sink back with relief when he saw the cause of the disturbance. It was an elephant, a small beast, one of the rare pigmy type that occur only in that region. Obviously unaware of him it glided through the trees with surprisingly little noise, presently to vanish like a wraith in the shadows.

Ginger sat tense. What had disturbed it? There wasn't a sound; but he knew there must be something, someone, not far away, or the elephant wouldn't have been moving at such speed at that time of day. It wasn't browsing, or walking quietly from one feeding ground to another. It was running in alarm, its trunk held high, questing the air for scent of its enemy. What enemy? There could be only one answer to that, Ginger told himself. Man. The elephant wouldn't have behaved as it had for any other reason except possibly lions; 52

and there would hardly be lions in the deep forest from which it had come. Lions, he knew, preferred the plains.

The uncomfortable feeling that he was not alone persisted. He stared into the sombre shadows of the forest, or into as much of it as he could command without moving his position. He could see nothing. Not a sound broke the sultry silence. His eyes explored the sun-drenched plain. Two vultures sat motionless on a dead branch. That was all. Slowly he rose to his feet for a better view. The tree, on the root of which he had been seated, obstructed his view in one direction with its massive trunk. Two silent steps took him clear of it.

Instantly things happened with the speed of light.

Behind the tree, within five yards of it, was a crouching black, who, spear half raised, had obviously been stalking him. Their eyes met. For a split second they stared at each other, rigid. The black moved first. He sprang erect. His spear jerked back for the throw. Ginger's gun crashed as he fired from the hip. The native dived into the ground, the spear quivering at Ginger's feet.

It had all happened in a second of time.

With the report of the shot still ringing in his ears Ginger leaned back against the tree, white and shaking from shock at the suddenness of

the attack and the narrowness of his escape. He realized with a sinking feeling in the stomach what would have happened had it not been for the elephant, which had caused him to reach for his gun. Otherwise there would have been no time to take it from his pocket. There had hardly been time for thought. He knew from the expression on the black's face, apart from his sudden movement, that he was going to throw the spear. His own reaction, in pulling the trigger of his automatic, had been prompted

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by the instinct of self-preservation. And, as it happened, the shot had killed the man stone dead. He consoled his conscience by telling himself that it had to be one or the other of them, and it was better as it was.

His one thought now was to get away from the place, for should his assailant have friends near, the shot would bring them along. Scrambling his things together in the bag he picked it up and hastened towards the sunlight, for after what had happened the forest gave him the horrors.

After going a few hundred yards he turned into a clump of acacia which, standing alone, gave him a clear view all round. There he sat down to recover his composure and think over what had happened. Why had the man tried to murder him? He had done him no injury. He had never seen him before. That apparently didn't matter. Clearly, the black would have killed any white man. Why? Such behaviour was so unusual that Ginger felt there must be not only a reason, but a strong motive behind it. In Kenya he could have understood it; but that unhappy country was far away. There was this about it, he pondered grimly; if proof were needed of the natives' hostility, he now had it. Another thing that had become evident was, his part in the operation was not going to be the simple one he had imagined. To move about at all was going to be dangerous, particularly if the body of the man he had killed was found, for then it would be known that a white man was in the district and a search made for him. How, in such conditions, he was going to reach Biggles if and when that became necessary, he couldn't imagine. He wished fervently that he had Algy or Bertie with him. He was feeling horribly alone. Perhaps Algy would be able to suggest something. It was time he tried to get in touch with him.

Nervously, with frequent glances round, he began to 54

set up the radio; but hardly had he got it assembled than a new cause for anxiety presented itself. From behind an anthill a hundred yards away walked a lion. It looked round, yawned mightily, and lay down in the grass. Ginger could just see the black tips of its ears. The beast obviously didn't know he was there, and, except in the rare chance of it being a man-eater, would be unlikely to molest him if it did. But, aggressive or not, the fact that the animal was there did nothing to make the situation easier. There was this about it. he told himself moodily; the brute might act as a watchdog, and by its behaviour tell him if men were approaching. But he would have preferred something smaller to deal with should the animal wind him and resent his presence in its domain. Moving quietly, keeping an eye on the lion, he got ready to operate, aware that this part of the scheme was likely to prove more difficult than Biggles had foreseen. He expected no trouble in making radio contact with the Halifax. The worry was how to let Algy know his exact position. He could give him his approximate position over the air, but that wasn't enough. The idea had been, having got the machine in his area he would expose himself in the open and perhaps light a smoke fire which would be seen for miles. He could still do that; but if he did he would also betray himself to any natives within miles—to say nothing of the lion.

However, he went to work on the operation call-signal, and after about five minutes got a reply from Bertie, although reception was very faint. That was unimportant. Once Bertie had got the direction he should have no difficulty in following it. So it worked out, as the growing strength of reception revealed. By the time he had conveyed the information that the Hastings was down, and he was on the ground on the northern frontier of Liberia. he could see the machine

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in the distance. In as few words as possible he explained the difficulties of showing his position. Bertie, naturally, asked what he wanted them to do.

Ginger. in desperation, resolved on a desperate course of action. He said he would light a fire but dare not remain with it. Having lit it he would move off in a northerly direction. Thus, if they saw his smoke, they would know he was moving along a line north of it. He was unlikely to get more than a mile or two, so if. anywhere on that line, they could see a possible landing place, would they please come dawn? If not he would look for a place himself; but as this would take time they had better refuel and return in the morning. Bertie told him to go ahead. They were all right for fuel for another half-hour. Ginger



packed his kit. Working at feverish speed he collected dry grass and any rubbish that came to hand and piled it inside the thicket. He then had a good look round. The only movement was the aircraft circling in the distance. The only sound was the faint drone of its engines. He looked for the lion without finding it. He hoped it had gone but he hadn't seen it go. With everything ready he put a match to the fire, and with his pocket compass in one hand and his bag in the other, he set off across the plain. His course took him close to the anthills where he had last seen the lion. To his relief there wasn't a sign of it, so with frequent backward glances at the forest he strode on. A nice column of smoke was coiling into the still air from his fire. If anything it was too nice, for every native within miles must surely see it, he thought anxiously. However, it would soon burn itself out. He hoped Algy would spot it before it did. A slight movement to the right caught his eye. Something was rising slowly out of the yellow grass about twenty yards away. At first he couldn't make out 56

what it was; when he did, his heart missed a beat. It was the lion. Still in the same place. Apparently it had been there all the time. It had raised its massive head above the top of the grass and was gazing calmly and steadily at him. He couldn't see its body, which seemed to fade into the ground. It seemed incredible that such a big beast could keep out of sight in such a flimsy piece of cover.

Ginger walked on. There was nothing else he could do. He watched the lion. The lion watched him. It was uncanny how the beast, without appearing to move, always kept full head on to him. This turned to something like sheer magic when a lioness, the presence of which he had not suspected, rose to her feet behind the lion and had a good stare at him. Dry-lipped Ginger walked on without altering his pace, although every instinct in him was screaming at him to run. But that, he knew, could do no good, and might be fatal. After what seemed an age, in which time he covered perhaps a hundred yards, he looked back. The lioness was lying down. Her mate was still watching him, but the danger, Ginger thought thankfully, had passed.

The smoke of his fire had by this time thinned to a faint haze, but apparently it had served its purpose for the Halifax was now standing directly towards it, losing height. This put Ginger into better heart, for if Algy hadn't already spotted him he soon would. But there could be no question of the machine landing, for the ground, while flat, bristled with obstructions—odd trees, clumps of scrub and anthills. However, it was enough to go on with, mused Ginger, that his position had been pinpointed. The danger of remaining in the open caused him to head for another group of small, flat-topped trees. Having reached his

objective he made haste to re, sume radio contact. While he was getting ready, the

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Halifax, now low, circled, from which he supposed that Algy was looking for a place that offered a reasonable chance of landing. This assumption turned out to be correct when presently Bertie told him that the nearest possible spot was about four miles farther on. Ginger was disappointed, but it was something to know there was a place within reach. As, obviously, he couldn't get to it before the machine ran out of fuel, he asked Algy what he wanted him to do. After a short delay Bertie announced that Algy had decided to go to Accra, on the Gold Coast, the nearest British airport, to refuel. He would return in the morning as soon as it was light. Ginger was to push on to the prospective landing ground and wait there. If he was satisfied that it was safe to risk a landing they would come down.

Ginger agreed that it was the only reasonable thing to do. He told Algy what had happened to the Hastings, and said that Biggles, who had been arrested, was, as far as he knew, about five miles south of his present position. He thought Algy would be wise to keep clear of the place until they had had a talk and settled on a plan of action. Algy agreed, and as he was getting nervous about the petrol position waited only long enough to drop a can of water and some food before heading west. Ginger collected his rations and then, standing on the fringe of his thicket, watched the machine fade into the glowing colours of the African sunset.

The drone of the engines died away and silence once more settled over the plain. He had a quick snack and a drink. Then, getting his kit together he set off on his walk, determined to get as near to the new objective as possible before darkness made travel too dangerous, if not impossible. For if, he reasoned, Algy was going to arrive soon after dawn,

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and the ground had to be surveyed before a landing was attempted, he had no time to lose. Apart from that, he felt that the farther he got from the forest the safer he would be from the blacks who by this time might be looking for him.

GINGER, MARCHING NORTH on his compass course, made

good time, or as good as could be expected, for he had to advance in

the manner of a scout, spying the country in front of him, and, with even closer attention, the ground behind. His fears were not for any wild animals he might encounter—although not being accustomed to walking practically unarmed through country where they roamed at large he watched for them with some trepidation—but men. Men were the real danger. With regard to the animals it is true he had a pistol; but he also had the sense to realize that it would not be much use against a big beast in a nasty mood.

As a matter of detail he saw quite a lot of game, mostly at a distance, chiefly antelopes of one sort or another. He saw zebra, giraffe, and once a skulking hyena. These bothered him not at all. Any on his line of march made off.

Just about dusk; in that half-light in which it is difficult to see anything clearly, a small herd of zebra did him a good turn. They came galloping towards him, frisking and kicking up their heels. Knowing that he hadn't disturbed them he wondered what had, and backed into some uncomfortably prickly shrub to see if the cause would reveal itself. It might equally well be lions or men.

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It turned out to be men; a party of about a dozen spear-armed blacks trotting in single file, heading south. They appeared suddenly out of the gloom and passed within a score of yards of him. They might have been friendly, but he was taking no chances, and remained in hiding until they were lost in the purple haze that now hung over the landscape.

Reckoning that he had covered rather more than two miles he decided to call it a day and look for somewhere to pass the night while there was still enough light to see what he was doing. Not that there was much choice. The ground had for some time been becoming more open, and short of squatting against an anthill or a bush he was faced with the prospect of sitting down on the open ground. This, it need hardly be said, did not fill him with enthusiasm. In broad daylight, when the approach of danger could be seen, it was bad enough. In the darkness of night it was likely to be hair-raising. He did not contemplate sleep.

It is an age-old instinct to sit with one's back to something for protection in at least one direction, and for this reason he would have chosen a tree had there been one. There was not, so he took the next best thing, which was a clump of wait-a-bit thorn; but as he neared it

a sudden crash inside told him it was already occupied and he changed his mind with alacrity. With the dusk fading to deep night he had to decide quickly, and he finished up seated on the crumbling remains of a dead anthill. Night fell. There was no moon. So there he sat, ears strained, pistol in hand for company, with nothing to do but await the passing of time. And as usual in such circumstances the minutes seemed to move with the greatest reluctance. Once or twice he heard lions in the distance and a hyena let out its blood-curdling laugh not far away; but apart from that nothing happened,

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and he relaxed sufficiently to nibble a biscuit. He was afraid to light a fire for fear it might be seen. There was also a risk of starting one bigger than he intended. Just after midnight a full moon soared up over the horizon and flooded the scene with pale blue radiance. This was better, and it cheered him a lot, for so bright was the light that visibility was not much less than daylight. Presently, after satisfying himself that all was quiet around him, it struck him that he would incur no greater risk in walking than by sitting still. Walking would be less tedious than doing nothing at all, and the earlier he reached the objective the more time would he have to survey the ground. Picking up his bag he set off, and without an incident of any sort kept up a steady pace for two hours, when, well satisfied, he halted for fear of overshooting the mark. He felt sure he had reached the place described by Bertie, for with the exception of a straggling growth of scrub by which he had stopped the ground seemed bare except, of course,

for the usual sun-withered grass. All he could do now was wait, so dumping his bag he sat down and made an early breakfast of biscuits and sardines. It turned bitterly cold just before dawn, the change of temperature giving rise to a slight mist, which he knew the sun would soon dispel; so as soon as it was light enough to see he was glad to be on the move, examining the ground for obstructions. There was none of any importance, although as a landing field the place was not as good as Algy had seemed to think. There were rough patches and occasional humps of tussocky grass, although these wouldn't matter as long as Algy saw them, for between them there was plenty of room. To make them more conspicuous he marked them with sticks to which he had tied strips of material cut from the bottom of his shirt. This done he sat down 62

again and made ready to contact Algy as soon as he heard him coming. This happened about half an hour later, by which time, as he

expected, the mist had lifted. He was soon in touch with the machine, telling Bertie where he was and about the sticks he had put out to mark the bad spots. There was a good straight run between them, but this was really the only safe place.

Even as he said this he saw, to his fury and consternation, a rhinoceros walking slowly towards the very spot he had just described. Reaching the middle of the runway, almost as if it knew what it was doing, it stopped and started grazing. Ginger raged. The beast would have to choose that particular spot at that particular moment, he told himself furiously. He had no fear of Algy not seeing a creature of such size, but while it was there he certainly wouldn't be able to land. To make matters more difficult the beast occasionally moved its position a trifle, so there was no knowing where it would be by the time Algy made his approach, should he try to get in. Aside from that, knowing the unpredictable nature of such animals, Ginger knew it was just as likely to charge the aircraft as run away from it.

The rhino was the best part of a hundred yards from where he was standing with his back to the bushes, and short of exposing himself to death should the beast charge—as it well might if he molested it—he could think of only one possible way of moving it. As a weapon his pistol was of course quite useless against the armour-plated monster. He would have about as much chance of stopping it, should it come for him, as he would of putting a tank out of action. But he might alarm it, he thought, in which case it would move off. At the distance it was standing it was unlikely to see him, for the rhino is notoriously short-sighted.

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Raising his pistol he took careful aim and fired.

At the crack of the shot, although Ginger knew he hadn't hit it, the beast sprang round to face each point of the compass in quick succession, seeking the cause of the noise. Then, to his annoyance, it calmly resumed its grazing. Again Ginger fired. Again he missed. Again the great beast spun round. Again, apparently satisfied that the shot was not directed at it, the creature continued its meal.

Ginger became really annoyed, for the Halifax was now circling, waiting for the rhino to move off or for Ginger to do something about it. What Ginger did was fire two shots in quick succession at the same time letting out a yell. The second shot found its mark, for he distinctly heard the smack of the bullet. It may have stung. At all

events, the result surpassed all expectations.

The rhino snorted, squealed with rage, and then set off at such a gallop that Ginger would not have thought possible. At first it travelled at an angle that would miss him by a comfortable margin; but then it must have winded him, or seen the bushes, and as there was nothing else to charge made for them like a run-away locomotive. Ginger stood still. It was all he could do. Had there been a tree handy he would have swarmed up it, but there wasn't one within a mile. Wherefore, stiff with fright, he could only stand his ground, hoping the beast, which had its head down, wouldn't see him. Apparently it didn't, for passing about ten yards away it went through the bushes like a bulldozer in a cloud of flying twigs, clods and dust. It didn't stop, and to Ginger's unspeakable relief he heard its hooves receding into the distance. By the time he was able to breathe again the Halifax

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was on the ground, trundling towards him. On legs that felt curiously weak he walked out to meet it.

Bertie jumped down. He was laughing. "By Jove, old boy, you certainly put the breeze up that big boy who was standing on the runway."

Ginger considered him mirthlessly. "I put the breeze up him! What you mean is, he put the gust up me. It wasn't in the least funny," he added coldly. "Nor is strolling about this open-air menagerie armed with a popgun."

Algy joined them. "Give us the gen," he invited.

Standing in the shade of the fuselage, for the sun was beginning to warm up, Ginger told all that had happened from the time the Hastings' compass had taken the machine off its course.

"Well, that's how Biggles wanted it," averred Algy. "What's the drill now?" Ginger answered: "There are two or three things we ought to do. First, we ought to let the Air-Commodore know what's happened so that he doesn't send any more V.I.P.'s this way. We shall have to try to contact Biggles in case he's in a jam. And lastly, since it's unlikely that Biggles is in a position to do it, we should find out where this unknown machine is parked and have a dekko at the weapon that can cut engines in the air. The more you think about that the grimmer it looks."

"Absolutely. Couldn't agree more," murmured Bertie.

"It looks to me," opined Algy thoughtfully, "as if the Halifax is too big for this job. It sets such a limit on where we can get down. We had to use something with a long range in the first place, but now we know where we are an Auster would be a jolly sight handier." Ginger shrugged. "That's up to you."

"I tell you what," decided Algy. "I don't see how 65

we can leave you here on your own, Ginger. Bertie had better stay with you. I'll whistle along to Dakar, and leaving the Halifax there push on home in the regular service. I'll report to the Air-Commodore and come back in the Auster. We should then have both types available."

"You mean you'll come back here, where we are now?"

"Yes. In the Auster. The Halifax can stay at Dakar. I ought to be back in three or four days."

"All right. We'll call this the rendezvous," said Ginger. "It might be possible to get the Auster down nearer the forest. We'll keep an eye open for a place."

"Fair enough. You push along with Bertie and try to locate Biggles and anything else of interest. I'll come back here. If you're not here when I get here I'll wait. Today's Tuesday. With most of the day in front of me aim to be back Friday at latest. Be careful what you get up to. I mean, don't risk barging in on Biggles before he's had a chance to get the information he wants. If you can find out just where he is it'll be enough to go on with."

"Okay."

"If that's all I'll press on," said Algy. "Get a supply of grub out of the machine."

"I'll have a clip or two of cartridges at the same time," said Ginger, remembering that his gun was nearly empty.

These arrangements complete, Algy was about to go aboard when from the distance came the drone of an aircraft. The sound came from the south. Standing still together they stared in that direction.

It was some minutes before they saw the machine, the reason being

that it was very low, and at the same time flying up and down in parallel lines like a survey machine taking strip photographs.

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"That's it," cried Ginger. "That's the kite that was hanging about us when the engines cut. It followed us in when we went down. And I reckon I know what it's doing. It's looking for me—or for whoever killed that bloke in the forest."

"If it comes this way the pilot will see my machine," said Algy tersely.

"In which case you're likely to stay here," declared Ginger. "Push off while it's some distance away. They won't hear you for the noise of their own engines, and they won't see you if you keep low."

"I think you're right," answered Algy crisply. "So long. See you about Friday." He hurried into the cockpit. The engines roared. The Halifax swung round and raced over the rough ground into the air.

Ginger breathed a sigh of relief. "He should be all right," he said, as they watched the machine out of sight. "Let's get cracking," he suggested. "But we shall have to keep near cover in case that snooper comes close."

Picking up their baggage they started walking, keeping an eye on the still questing aircraft.

GINGER, NOW WITH BERTIE for company, began a

cautious return to the forest behind which lay the airstrip on which the Hastings had landed. It was slow work, for the unknown aircraft, flying low, was still quartering the ground. Ginger was convinced that it was looking for him; or if not for him personally then for possible passengers in the Hastings. At all events, he could think of no other reason for its behaviour. Often they were forced to take cover when it came near. Ginger took the opportunity to rest, for he was tired, and made no secret of it. Bertie, who seemed to find it hard to believe that the natives of the district were as dangerous as Ginger had said, was all for pushing on faster. "This Red Indian stuff may be all right for kids, but it's binding me rigid," he averred. "Besides, all this walking is liable to give you blisters."

"You'll move fast enough if you trip over a lion," promised Ginger.

"Lions? What fun. I don't see any, old boy."



"They don't go out of their way to make themselves conspicuous," Ginger pointed out. He indicated some

anthills. "There were a couple over there yesterday. I nearly walked into 'em."

"They don't seem to be there now."

"They didn't seem to be there yesterday, either," returned Ginger sarcastically. The lions may have heard their voices, for at this moment the male raised his head so that his eyes just showed above the fringe of tawny grass.

"See what I mean?" murmured Ginger, cuttingly. "Too true .. . too true. Absolutely," came back Bertie in a different tone of voice.

"It may be a relief to you to know that the old gentleman watching us isn't the biting sort,

" said Ginger casually, as they started to make a detour.

"Are you quite sure of that?" asked Bertie, looking worried as the lion's head turned slowly to watch them in the same disconcerting manner as on the previous day.

"That's how he behaved yesterday."

"But he may not have been hungry yesterday—if you see what I mean."

"I wouldn't know about that," returned Ginger, lightly. "The great thing is, if you don't interfere with them they don't interfere with you. That's the secret."

"Who told you?"

"I read it in a book."

At that moment the lion stood up, his tail, flicking from side to side. The lioness rose behind him, growling horribly deep in her throat.

"You know, old boy, if you hadn't told me those cats weren't vicious I'd have said they were going to have a-, crack at us," declared Bertie, anxiously. "What's the drill? You're the expert."

Ginger stopped. He took a quick look round. There

was not a tree of any size within half a mile. "We shall have to stare them out," he decided. "If we run we've had it. Pistols are no use against those brutes."

"Stare them out !" exclaimed Bertie desperately. "Is that all you can think of?"

"Can you think of anything else?"

"No."

At that moment the lion charged, covering the ground with great leaps, his mate following.

"Stand still," gasped Ginger. "It's our only chance." It may have been that the lion's charge was never, more than a half-hearted affair. At thirty yards he began to slow down. At twenty yards he stopped, looking puzzled. The lioness stopped. And there they all stood for perhaps ten seconds, the animals staring, still growling, Ginger and Bertie, pistols ready for use, motionless. Then the lion turned round and began to walk away, from time to time looking back over his shoulder as if not knowing what to make of the situation. Not until they had disappeared from sight behind the anthills did either Ginger or Bertie speak. As far as Ginger was concerned speech would have been difficult.

"You know, old boy, it's time you took a refresher course on the behaviour of lions," stated Bertie, somewhat shakily.

"It's time we had more sense than to walk about lion country armed only with a couple of pea-shooters," answered Ginger bitterly. "We must be crazy."

"I suspected that some minutes ago," replied Bertie. "Talk about butterflies in the stomach! My stomach fell out, butterflies and all. Let's press on in case the blighters change their minds and come back."

With frequent glances behind them they pushed on under a now blazing sun until the edge of the forest

ran across their front at a distance of a few hundred yards. So far they had seen no sign of natives, but aware that this might happen' at any

moment their progress became slower as with ears and eyes alert they moved from cover to cover—usually anthills or stunted growths of acacia. The khaki drill shirts and shorts they both wore blended well with the parched herbage.

They had one narrow escape

close enough to make them aware of the risks they

were taking. They had stopped in a thicket for a moment's rest and to recon-noitre the ground in front of them. Ginger would have sworn that there was not a soul in sight, and it was only a movement that banished this false impression. A native, who must have been standing dead still against the black background of the forest, suddenly put himself into a position of defence and struck at an unseen object on the ground with his spear. He struck several times, jumping sideways like a cat after each stroke. Then, somewhat surprisingly, he fled into the trees.

"You see," said Ginger, deadly serious. "If that chap hadn't moved we should have walked right into trouble.",

"What 'sort of game was he playing, do you think?" asked Bertie. "The stinker seemed to be practising his hop-sotch."

"My guess is he was having a poke at a snake. Whatever it was it was so low on the ground I couldn't see it. It must have been a snake."

"Why worry the brute?"

"Maybe it was worrying him. The mamba is about the only snake that will attack without provocation. He couldn't have got it or he wouldn't have bolted; but he must have peeved it, so watch you don't step on it."

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"Natives—lions—snakes. . . . What we need here, old boy, is a tank," muttered Bertie morosely.

Ginger raised a finger towards the trees. "That's our line. It should bring us to the airstrip somewhere near the Hastings. It must still be there. They obviously intend to keep it or they wouldn't have troubled to camouflage the top surfaces." With infinite caution now they went on, and to Ginger's relief reached the forest without further incident. The same uncanny silence reigned as when he had left it. They

advanced to a tree.

"This is where I shot the man who tried to spear me," whispered Ginger. He went on a few paces and stopped. "They must have found the body," he breathed. "It's gone. Ssh!

What's that?"

They looked at each other as from the distance, but approaching, came a murmur of voices. It came from the direction taken by the native who had fled. Without speaking they backed into an isolated patch of palmetto shrubs, stood still and watched. The noise drew swiftly nearer, and presently there came into sight, on the open ground that fringed the forest, a line of perhaps a dozen blacks spread out in the form of a crescent. The men walked slowly, each with his spear raised, eyes searching the ground in front.

For a ghastly moment Ginger thought they had been seen and the men were looking for their tracks. Indeed, he had convinced himself of this when shouts and sudden action told him he was mistaken. A black hurled his spear. Others followed, and the fact that the target was on the ground told Ginger the truth. It was the snake they were after. He couldn't see it. But when, presently, it struck, he got a brief glimpse of it. The creature missed its mark, but it must have

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moved like lightning, for a split second later it had its fangs in the calf of another man. The doomed black screamed, and his reaction turned Ginger's skin gooseflesh, as the saying is..

He seized the writhing serpent with both hands, tore it from his leg, and in paroxysm of fury tried to kill it with his teeth. Then, hurling it down, he stamped on it. Others went at it with their spears and in a matter of seconds the reptile had been hacked to pieces. The man who had been struck sank down. The rest took no notice of him, but at once engaged in a fierce altercation, presumably discussing the incident.

To them this may not have been an uncommon event, but Ginger could only stare at the spectacle in horror. Why the man who had been bitten had behaved as he had, even though he knew what the result would be, was beyond his comprehension. The noise lasted for about ten minutes, by the end of which time the stricken man was dead. Ginger got the impression that they were merely waiting for him to die, for they now picked up the limp body and bore it away with

renewed shouts. When they had faded into the distance, Bertie, adjusting his eyeglass, looked at Ginger with a sickly smile. "That was a pretty business, I must say," he observed. "If that's snake hunting give me foxes every time—yes, by Jove. These blighters aren't human." Ginger could only shake his head helplessly.

"Let's press on, old boy," requested Bertie earnestly. "I'm all for getting airborne again as soon as possible." \_ "I couldn't agree more," murmured Ginger in a hollow voice.

"The place stinks," was Bertie's final summing up.

They went on through the giant trees which in

places grew so close together that hardly a ray of light

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found its way through the tangled foliage. Fallen trees had to be climbed, and care taken not to trip in trailing vines. After twenty minutes or so of this the immediate objective, the airstrip, showed as a light patch ahead. Ginger located the spot where he had hidden his parachute. It was not there.

"They must know for certain that Biggles wasn't alone," he said. The Hastings was just as he had last seen it. They could see nobody with it. In fact, there was no sign of life anywhere on the landing ground.

Ginger pointed. "That's the way they took Biggles in the jeep. Let's carry on that way."

"But hold hard, old boy," protested Bertie. "What about the machine?"

"What about it?"

"Well, it seems a pity we can't do something about it—if you see what I mean."

"It's no use to us. We can't go and leave Biggles here, even if the engines would start. They may not. It would be interesting to know. But we should look silly if we tested them and they did start. We might as well walk about yelling 'here we are' and have done with it."

"We might as well have a look inside to see if everything's all right." Ginger agreed, and after a short dash across the open they found themselves in the cabin. Nothing appeared to have been touched, so,

as the day was now well advanced they took the opportunity to sit down in comfort and have a quick meal. They had just finished when the sound of an aircraft coming in took them to a window.

"That's the machine which I'm sure had something

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to do with bringing us down," declared Ginger. "I'm dashed if I know what it is."

"It's got an American cut about it," offered Bertie. Ginger agreed. "Anyway, it isn't a standard type."

They watched the machine land and then taxi diagonally to the forest on the far side of the airstrip where it disappeared in the shadows. The engines died. Some figures could be seen moving about. No actual hangar could be seen, for the edge of the forest was very irregular.

"That must be where they keep it," said Ginger. "With luck we'll have a look at it presently. There goes the jeep." The vehicle could be seen bumping along the edge of the forest on the far side of the landing ground.

"What's the routine now, old boy," inquired Bertie. "Do we look for Biggles or try to get a dekko inside the mystery kite?"

"As we can't cross the airstrip in daylight we'd better carry on down the side to see if we can locate the headquarters of this outfit. That's where Biggles will be, I imagine."

"It won't be daylight much longer," Bertie pointed out. "But I think you're right. Biggles must come first."

This settled, they dashed back to the forest and continued on, keeping, of course, inside the trees. And they hadn't gone far when they saw their departure from the machine had been well timed; for there now appeared, walking towards it, two of the uniformed negroes. Ginger and Bertie crouched while they went past not more than ten yards away. They were talking, but only a few odd words reached Ginger's ears. Reaching the Hastings they went inside, and as they did not come out again it could be supposed that they intended remaining there.

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"We were out just in time," remarked Bertie, soberly.

"The luck's on our side so far," replied Ginger. "Let's hope it holds. I couldn't make out what those fellows were talking about but they were speaking English."

"I know. It's a rum go, laddie," opined Bertie.

They went on in light that was beginning to fail with the close of day. They moved even more slowly, aware that every step they took put them into a position of increasing danger. Somewhere in the now dark heart of the forest a drum began to throb. It was answered by another in the distance. In these conditions they reached the end of the airstrip. The track showed them which way the jeep had gone. Still they pressed on, for as Ginger pointed out, once it was completely dark it would be impossible to move through the forest and it would still be too dangerous to walk in the open. When lights began to show ahead they knew they were nearing the end of the trail, but it was now too dark to see anything distinctly. Some figures, one of whom carried a torch, looming in the darkness, coming towards them, brought them to a halt. Standing there they watched a barbed wire gate dragged across the end of the track, and light shining on a continuation of the wire told them the truth. The camp, or whatever lay beyond, was enclosed, and they were on the wrong side of the wire. The men who had closed the gate retired the way they had come.

"Now what?" breathed Bertie.

"All we can do is try to follow the wire," answered Ginger, not very convincingly, for he was doubtful if this would prove possible. But they might, he thought, find a place from where they could get a better idea

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of what lay inside the wire. Anyway, he could think of nothing else to do.

"We can try it," agreed Bertie.

Guns in hand, in case they should be discovered, they started. THE FIRST STEP taken by Ginger and Bertie was the obvious one. They investigated the fence; and it did not take them long to perceive that without wire cutters there was no hope of getting to the far side of it. With strands stretched taut only a few inches apart it was not less than

eight feet high, with loops or festoons of barbed wire along the top to entangle anyone who tried to climb over it. But then, as Ginger pointed out, had the fence not been manproof there would have been no point to it.

"This is no temporary base, that's certain," said Ginger in a low voice. "No one would have gone to all this trouble for a short stay."

"Too true—too true," agreed Bertie. "This is where a pair of cutters would have come in handy."

"Who could have expected anything like this?"

"Not me," admitted Bertie. "I hate the beastly stuff." The next discovery was less disheartening. Ginger, at least, had supposed that the jungle would have grown into the fence, making passage along the outside impossible; instead of which there was a path of sorts, the trees and bushes having been cut back to leave a narrow gap.

"I reckon than can only mean one thing," observed

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Bertie, looking at it—or what could be seen of it in the darkness. "Sentries stroll round occasionally."

"In daylight, perhaps. But with wild beasts about not often after dark, I'll bet. Any beast coming to the fence would follow it, looking for a way round."

"That's a cheerful thought," remarked Bertie.

"It's a chance we shall have to take," declared Ginger. "It's no use standing here. Let's push along until we reach a place from where we can see what it's all about." Moving slowly they set off along the narrow track and soon came in sight of lights. Everything else was vague, but they could make out the dim silhouettes of buildings and once in a while a shadow would cross an area of light. Stopping to watch they saw two men, white men by their clothes, leave a large building and walk slowly to a smaller one. Some distance away an engine was started and continued running.

"I wonder what they need power for," muttered Ginger.

"Electricity is my guess," replied Bertie. "They'd need it to charge their batteries if only for wireless. They're bound to have radio."



They went on for some time without making any discovery of a sensational nature. In fact, they learned nothing. The wire seemed to go on interminably, although Ginger had a feeling that they were travelling in a big oval, or rectangle. The stars brightened and confirmed it. There was nothing surprising about it as far as Ginger was concerned. From the outset it had been evident that the wire enclosed a camp, so they had only to go on long enough to arrive back at their starting point.

A second fence, running into the compound at right angles, brought them to a halt. "Now what?" muttered Ginger. "Don't say there are two camps." 79

"I vote we stay here until the moon comes up and we can see what we're doing," said Bertie. "This blundering about in the dark is no use, no use at all. Next thing we shall bump into somebody—or something."

"I think you're right," agreed Ginger.

By straining his eyes he could just make out the shape of the hut in the second compound, which was, so to speak, a pen within the outside wire. He thought he could see cigarettes glowing, but he wasn't sure. They might have been fireflies. There were some about. There was a faint murmur of voices, but it was too far off for words to be heard. It was not possible to get nearer.

"I wonder could Biggles be in that lot?" he whispered. "He must be in the camp somewhere."

"So must the troops," answered Bertie. "That hut might be their barracks. Let's not do anything in a hurry, old boy. We've got the whole night in front of us." They found a heap of brushwood, twigs that had been cut to keep the path open, and sat on it, the intention being to wait for moonrise. But before that happened there occurred events which were to put a very different construction on the situation. They began when Ginger saw, in the inner compound, a dark form creeping slowly and furtively towards them. It was not in the open, but close against the wire. From time to time it stopped, as if to listen. He squeezed Bertie's arm to call attention to it. So close to the wire did the figure move that for a time it was impossible to tell for certain on which side it was; but as it drew nearer, and revealed itself to be a man dressed in European fashion, Ginger saw, with considerable relief, that he was in fact on the inside of

the wire. Had it been otherwise he might have collided with them. However, as things were, there was little chance of the man seeing them, for they were well back under overhanging shrubs. For a moment Ginger had a wild hope that the prowler might turn out to be Biggles; but in this he was to be disappointed. The man was too heavily built. He came right on into the corner where the two fences met, within two or three yards of where Ginger and Bertie were now sitting as stiff as statues, and there he stopped, staring down the fence in the direction from which they had come.

Minutes passed. The man did not move. Nor did Ginger. He dare hardly breathe, for fear the man would hear him, so close was he. He could see his face well enough to make him out to be a white man, but nothing more. From his attitude it was plain that he was waiting for someone, for which reason from time to time Ginger switched his eyes to the direction into which the man was staring. He dare not move his body. The next development was the appearance of a second dark figure, striding with a limp along the wire from the opposite direction, obviously the person for whom the first man was waiting. Coming up, without preamble, the newcomer, in a low but curt voice said :

"Hollweg."

"Ja," replied the man who had waited.

At the sound of the first voice Ginger's nerves had so vibrated that he hardly heard the reply. Subconsciously the limp had touched a chord in his memory. The voice confirmed a suspicion almost before it was formed. The newcomer was von Stalhein. Ginger was startled rather than surprised, for as the Air-Commodore had said, these encounters with a man who was almost Biggles's opposite number, working for the enemy, were inevitable. Now they were literally, as well as figuratively, on each side of the

fence. Bertie nudged him gently to let him know that he was keeping pace with the situation.,

Von Stalhein went on: "What are they doing?" "Talking."

"What about?"

"War flying."

"Any talk of escape?"

"No."

"Have you heard Bigglesworth mention any friends of his who might be about?"

"No. But they are suspicious of me now and stop talking when I'm near. Bigglesworth has spent much time talking to the General and the pilot Wragg."

"Very well. Now go and tell Bigglesworth that I'd like to speak to him here—alone. Don'

t let the others hear."

"Jawohl." The original man walked off in the direction of the hut, leaving von Stalhein standing by the fence, taking frequent glances in the direction from which he had come as if apprehensive of something.

Ginger's brain was in a whirl as he strove to put a reasonable construction on the purpose of this clandestine assignation. For that it was clandestine was obvious from von Stalhein's manner. What on earth did he want with Biggles? It was the first time in Ginger's recollection that he had expressed a wish to speak to him. The only clear fact in this baffling mystery was that Biggles was there, behind wire, with a pilot and at least one passenger of the lost Hastings.

Ginger hoped that Biggles would not be long. for he was in a cramped position yet dare not move a muscle for fear of cracking one of the twigs on which he sat. Presently Biggles came. He, too, was on the wrong side of the wire, of course. "Good evening, von Stalhein," he began. "Hollweg tells me you want to see me. How are you off for cigarettes? With the boys running short mine are almost finished."

"You probably have enough to last you for the short time you'll be needing them—unless you're prepared to behave like the sensible man I know you to be," answered von Stalhein coldly. "Have you thought over my proposition?"

"No. There was nothing to think about."

"You know they're going to shoot you in the morning. I can't hold

them off any longer."

"So I understand."

"I hope you appreciate the risks I'm taking in coming here like this."

"I appreciate that any risks you're taking are for yourself."

"If Christophe knew I was here he'd shoot me as well as you."

"It would at least be in the true tradition of drama for us both to go out together."

"Christophe's a fanatic as well as a scoundrel."

"Why scoundrel? Because he pulled a fast one on you? You'd have double-crossed him given the chance. Don't bleat because he outsmarted you."

"Without our help he would never have got the plane."

"So what? He got it and stuck to it, and now makes your boss pay for what he was hoping to get for nothing. I'd rather he had it than you."

"There's no need to go over that again. We're wasting time," retorted von Stalhein shortly. "In the morning you'll be shot. I have here a pair of wire cutters. With them you can get out and save your life. All I ask in return is that you fly us to a spot which I shall name, where a pilot is waiting, and there hand the machine over to me." 83

"And promptly be bumped off, or flown to the salt mines in Siberia until my lungs rot. Nothing doing."

"What about your fellow prisoners. They should have some say in the matter."

"They agree with me. By the way, does Zorotov know about this proposition?"

- "Of course not."

"I see. You'd leave him here."

"Certainly. He's playing his own hand to get the machine from Christophe."

"I must say you're a bright lot," sneered Biggles. "What about

Christophe's pilot. Have you tried him?"

"Dessalines? Yes. He won't play. I fancy he aims to be the Emperor of Africa."

"By bumping off Christophe."

"That, too, would be in accord with tradition. If you know your history, it was the original Christophe who murdered the original Dessalines. The modern Dessalines won't have forgotten that, you may be sure. He can afford to play a waiting game. But that's enough. I daren't wait here any longer. Will you stay here to be shot, or can I hand you these?" Von Stalhein showed a pair of wire cutters.

Biggles didn't answer at once. He seemed to be doing something to the leg of his trousers. Suddenly he stood erect, and there was a gun in his hand. "Give me those cutters, von Stalhein, or I'll drop you where you stand," he said crisply.

"Well—well," murmured von Stalhein. "So you've managed to keep a gun. Christophe will be interested to know that."

"He'll also be interested to know the proposition you put up to me," returned Biggles in a hard voice. "Hand over those cutters."

"If I knew you less well I might think you'd turned the tables on me," sneered von Stalhein. "But knowing

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you as I do I feel safe in calling your bluff. It just isn't in you to shoot an unarmed man at a range of two yards. I shall give you one last chance. Go and speak to Mander. I'll return in half an hour for your last word on the matter." With that he calmly turned his back on Biggles and walked away.

Biggles watched him go. Von Stalhein had called his bluff and it had worked. The trouble was, thought Ginger, who had watched the battle of wits with almost breathless suspense, von Stalhein knew Biggles too well.

He waited until the dark figure had merged into the gloom, and Biggles was just turning away, then rose stiffly to his feet, making a slight noise.

Biggles spun round. "Who's that?" he rapped out.

"It's us—me and Bertie," answered Ginger.

"Suffering Jupiter ! Have you been there all the time?" Biggles's voice was thin with amazement.

"We have. With von Stalhein on the wrong side of the wire we could do no more than you.. What was it all about. I couldn't quite get the hang of it."

"Perfectly simple. Iron Curtain agents in America bribed a negro pilot in the U.S. Air Force to pinch a plane designed to carry a secret weapon—the one that cut our engines. This bloke, Dessalines, and a pal named Christophe who was in with him, got away with the plane, but instead of handing it over went into business on their own account. They're forcing down planes carrying V.I.P.'s and selling state secrets to enemy agents. These agents want the plane, of course, but with all the blacks around here on Christophe's pay-roll they can't get to it. Christophe is in touch with them by radio. He reported that I

d arrived here and that was enough to bring Von Stalhein along. He's still working for the other side. That skunk Zorotov, whom we met in the West Indies, is with him. 85

They trust each other so little that they're not allowed to work single-handed. I don't wonder at that. Look at the game von Stalhein's playing now. He's prepared to get me out, double-crossing everyone else, if I'll fly this aircraft away and hand it over to him. He first made the proposition yesterday, after the official interview at which everyone was present. He came tonight for the answer."

"Are they really going to shoot you in the morning?"

"I think that's the intention. Christophe, who knows I'm a British agent, was all for shooting me out of hand. So was Zorotov. Von Stalhein got it postponed. For a little while I fooled myself with the belief that he did it merely to save my life. Actually, I was right, but he wasn't prompted by any nicer feelings. He saw a way, with my help, of getting what he wanted—the aircraft. As you heard, he just had another try. I've told him I won't play, but he's hoping Mander and the others will persuade me to call it a deal. Where's Algy, by the way?"

"Gone home to -tell the Chief what's cooking and. bring back an Auster. He's leaving the Halifax at Accra. We may not need the Auster but it can get down where the Halifax couldn't. We're due to meet Algy about five miles from here on Friday—possibly Thursday."

Berrie stepped in. "Never mind about that. The first thing is to get Biggles out of this pen. All we need is wire cutters. Von Stalhein has got a pair. We've got to get them off him when he comes back."

"How are you going to do that while he stays on his own side of the wire?" asked Biggles.

"I'll tell you," put in Ginger. "Had he been a yard nearer just now I could have grabbed those cutters he was showing you by reaching through the wire. When he comes back you stand here right in the corner, close against the fence. You ask him to show you the cutters to prove he's got them on him. When he pulls them out I'll grab his wrist through the wire."

"You'll get yourself shot. Don't forget he's got a gun."

"So have we got guns. So have you got a gun if it comes to that. Are they ornaments? If we can't use them in a case like this why bring them at all."

"It won't do to make a noise. There's a sentry at the gate of this pen, about fifty yards from here. But still," agreed Biggles, "it's worth trying. It might work."

"It's got to work," declared Ginger: "We've got to get those cutters or you've had it—we'

ve all had it."

"All right. Suppose we get out. I can't come alone, leaving the others here to take the rap. What's the best place to make for? You must have walked over the ground to get here, so you know more about it than I do."

"The Hastings is still on the airstrip, at the far end, where you left it."

"The engines may be dead. In any case I'm: not ready to leave here yet. If we're going to leave the secret weapon here we might as well have stayed at home. I'd rather have a shot at getting Christophe's machine."

"But you can't do that cluttered up with a crowd of people," argued Ginger. "Is Tony Wragg in there with you?"

"Yes."

"Then let him take his party to the Hastings and fly them out. We'll go for the other machine."

"What if the Hastings won't start up? If the ignition system has been fused, or something of that sort, it's finished."

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"Tony will have to take a chance on that. He'll still be better off than he is here. If he pushes on a mile or two he may see Algy."

"Fair enough. The first thing is to get out of this cage. Having done that we'll deal with fresh problems as they arise. I'll go and tell the others what's cooking so they can be standing by. Then I'll come back. You get under cover."

"Watch out for Hollweg. He's on the other side." "We know that. And he knows we know. We'll see he doesn't get in the way."

"Okay."

Biggles strode off.

Ginger and Bertie resumed their position under the black fringe of the jungle. STILL WRESTLING in his mind with the extraordinary situation that had arisen, out of nowhere, as the saying is, Ginger squatted in the darkest shadow he could find waiting for what might turn out to be the final showdown with von Stalhein, although at the moment, to serve his own ends, the German was actually trying to make a deal with Biggles. Biggles and von Stalhein working together, on the same side! The thing, he pondered, was not to be believed. Yet it was easy to see how such a situation had come about. The proposition von Stalhein had put forward would obviously suit them both—up to a point. Such an alliance would be formidable. The trouble was, it couldn't last. The German's undying hatred for Britain for winning the war would always be dominant. It seemed a pity, for each in his own way respected the other.

At the moment von Stalhein was playing as dangerous a game as could be imagined, for not only was he scheming to double-cross Christophe but his own partner, Zorotov, as well. That wouldn't worry him, for there were no rules in the Sinister Service; no fouls. On the other hand, Biggles's position was even more desperate, for should he reject von Stalhein's proposal it was unlikely he would see another sunset—unless 89



they could do something about it. They might. They held one good card. Von Stalhein didn't know they were there, although he probably suspected they were in the neighbourhood.

Bertie broke into Ginger's reverie. "While we're waiting, what about getting the drill watertight, old boy?"

"Okay. This is it," replied Ginger. "When von Stalhein shows the cutters

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"Suppose he doesn't?"

"Don't be awkward. He will, if Biggles asks to see them. That's reasonable. He wouldn't expect Biggles to take his word for anything. There's no reason why he shouldn't show the cutters, anyway."

"All right; don't get perky. He shows the cutters. Then what?"

"I shall grab his wrist, pull his arm between the wires and hang on, twisting his wrist to make him let go."

"What do I do?"

"Poke your gun in his ribs and. tell him to keep quiet—or else. Watch his spare hand. He'

ll go for his gun, too. How long it'll take him to get it will depend on where it is and in which hand he holds the cutters. Don't you stand for any nonsense. If this thing flops we'

ve had it. Speed is the thing. Speed without noise. We've got to get those cutters at the first snatch, no matter what happens. You heard what Biggles said about the sentry."

"Biggles has still got his gun so he should be able to deal with him if he gets too inquisitive."

"I think we ought to get away with it—provided nothing unexpected turns up."

"It usually does."

"Are you telling me?"

"What happens after you've got the cutters," asked Bertie.

"While you keep von Stalhein covered I shall cut the wires and let Biggles out."

"All this with von Stalhein yelling?"

"If I know anything he'll keep his mouth shut," said Ginger confidently. "If he yells he'll have to explain what he was doing here with wire cutters."

"And having got Biggles and the rest of 'em out we just do a bunk?"

"I imagine so. That's up to Biggles."

"Which is the best way to go?"

"Back the way we came. We know there are no snags in that direction. To go the other way might land us in a cul-de-sac or something, and I wouldn't fancy my chance trying to get through the jungle. But that will be for Biggles to say. You can bet your life he won't just push off leaving the secret weapon plane here for Christophe to play with."

"If the party splits, and Tony Wragg finds the Hastings won't start up, he'll be in a jam."

"No worse jam than he's in here."

"We mustn't forget. we've got a date with Algy."

"I hadn't forgotten it. We'll attend to that when the time comes. That light in the sky is the moon on the way. If it comes up before we're through it's going to be awkward. The sentry will spot us. I hadn't realized it was so late."

"Here comes Biggles now. He's got somebody with, him."

"It must be General Mander. He's too big for Tony."

Biggles walked into the corner. "All set?"

"Yes," answered Ginger. "I reckon we've got five more minutes—if von Stalhein arrives on time."

"He will. This is General Mander with me. He's come along to give a hand if necessary, and at the

same time give von Stalhein a second line of argument to keep him occupied. The rest of the party is waiting to make a rush if the plan works."

"What's the drill if you get out?"

"We shall make for the secret plane. Do you know where it's kept?"

"Yes. Roughly."

"Fine. The rest of the party will make for the Hastings and Tony will fly them to Dakar. That's enough. Here comes dear Erich." Biggles moved close against the wire, in the corner.

Von Stalhein came striding along the inside of the fence. There was no mistaking his slight limp from an old bullet wound. Once he stopped to have a penetrating look behind him, then came on to a halt a yard from where Biggles was standing. Apparently recognizing General Mander he wished him a good evening. "I hope you've been able to persuade Bigglesworth to bring his common sense to bear on my suggestion," he added.

"I don't know about that," returned the General, stiffly.

"The General doubts the integrity of your motives," put in Biggles, in a faintly bantering tone. "He says he'll believe in your wire cutters when he sees them."

"His doubts can soon be settled," said von Stalhein, putting his right hand in his pocket. At this crucial moment, Ginger, taking a swift look round to make sure that all was clear, saw, to his consternation, a man hurrying along the inside of the fence—following in von Stalhein's footsteps, in fact. White ducks told him it was a European. He didn't wait to see who it was. Biggles was already coughing to cover any slight noise. It was now or never.

Crouching, Ginger moved to the wire. Von Stalhein was returning the cutters to his pocket. Had it been his

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left pocket Ginger could not have reached it. But it was the right hand pocket. On trifles so small can life or death depend.

Ginger's arm went between two strands of wire with the speed of a striking snake. His fingers closed round von Stalhein's wrist and he

jerked it towards him with an his strength. But there he overdid it. Von Stalhein, taken unaware, lost his balance and fell against the wire. Ginger, encountering no resistance, went over backwards. He heard the cutters fall but didn't see where. Von Stalhein jerked his arm free. All this had taken place in less time than it takes to tell, and in silence. Now two voices cut into the scene. Bertie, menacing von Stalhein with his pistol, ordered him to stand still. Almost simultaneously someone called: "Von Stalhein, what are you doing there." It was the voice of von Stalhein's partner, Zorotov.

Ginger, panting with excitement, on his hands and knees, was groping wildly over the ground for the cutters. He heard Zorotov run up . . . heard von - Stalhein say: "I've got my sleeve caught on the wire." But Zorotov was not easily fooled. He obviously trusted his partner so little that he had followed him. Now he realized what was afoot, and gave vent to his rage in a stream of invective. Then, as if realizing that this was serving no useful purpose he yelled at the top of his voice : "Help! The prisoners are escaping!" He started to run towards the camp. "Christophe, von Stalhein is---" He got no farther. Von Stalhein's pistol blazed and he stumbled into the ground.

At that moment Ginger found the cutters and the moon soared up above the treetops. Ginger was determined that whatever happened Biggles should have the cutters. Shouting "catch", he tossed them into the compound. At least, that was the intention. They hit the top strand, glanced off and dropped straight.

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Biggles and von Stalhein dived for them together. Biggles got them and sprang to the outside fence.

By this time turmoil had become something like pandemonium, and Ginger hardly knew what he was doing. People were running from all directions. Bertie was telling von Stalhein in no uncertain voice that he'd shoot if he turned his gun in their direction. The sentry, apparently the one of whom they had been warned, came racing down the outside of the prisoners' pen. A man on the inside ran towards him, crying out something.

"That's Hollweg. Stop him, somebody," rasped Biggles. The sentry appeared to lose his head. He stopped, and began shooting indiscriminately, apparently under the impression that he was dealing with a mass escape —as, in fact, he was. He may have thought Hollweg was about to attack him. Anyway, being nearest, and an easy

target, the sentry fired, and managed to hit him. Hollweg fell against the wire and finished in a heap on the ground.

The sentry continued shooting wildly. Bullets zipped and smacked into the forest trees. Through it all, the cutters, in Biggles's hands, were biting through the wires with crisp snicks.

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Von Stalhein, presumably to support the explanation he would have to make to account for his presence there, now ran towards a group of figures coming from the direction of headquarters, shouting that the prisoners were escaping. Even at that crazy moment Ginger realized that it was to silence Zorotov, who Would have told a different story, that von Stalhein had shot him.

Biggles alone seemed reasonably calm. He snapped a shot at the still approaching sentry. He didn't hit him, or if he did the man gave no sign of it. But the 94

shot served its purpose. The sentry stopped, and must have decided that the job was too big for him to tackle single-handed, for he turned about and bolted, shouting.

"Out you. go., General," ordered Biggles. "Follow on the rest of you and make it snappy." That told Ginger that the wires had now been cut. Biggles joined him. "Lead on," he said tersely. "Let's get out of this madhouse. You know the way."

"You're going to make straight for the airfield?"

"Yee

"Come on, then." Ginger started running back down the track up which he and Bertie had come. He could hear the prisoners blundering along behind him. Men inside the fence were still running towards the corner which they had just left, as was natural, for they could not have known what had happened, and would, therefore, make for the spot where all the noise had been. Christophe's voice rose above others. Ginger derived considerable satisfaction from the fact that when they got to the corner they would not be able to get out to the path--unless they went along to the gate where the sentry had been on duty; for Biggles had, of course, cut through the fence on his own—that is, the prison—side of it. Some shots were fired. What at, and by whom, he did not know.

Nor did he know with what he had collided when, presently, rounding a sharp bend, he went headlong over a creature rushing the other way. It had, no doubt, been disturbed by the din. The creature squealed. Ginger, to whom the business was becoming a nightmare, picked himself up and ran on, gasping. He did not stop until he reached the broader track by the gate. Here there was more room to move, and he waited for Biggles to come up.

Biggles, who had of course been over the track in

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the jeep, now knew where he was. "Keep going, everybody," he ordered. "Let's get to the airstrip. We're doing fine. You watch the rear, Bertie." At a steady trot, with Biggles now in front with Ginger, the whole party went on down the track. With the camp in an uproar it could only be a matter of minutes before they were pursued so there was no question of scouting the ground in front. A chance had to be taken that no natives were abroad at that hour, and thus it seemed, for although drums could be heard throbbing in several directions, all some distance away, not a soul was seen on the run to the landing ground. When it came into view, bathed in moonlight, Biggles pulled up.

"This is where we part company," he told Tony. "You'll find my Hastings at the far end of the airstrip. Whether or not the engines will function I just don't know. You can only try it."

"What about you?"

"I've got to finish the job -I came here to do. With any luck I should soon be following you in the secret plane. If I can't get it I shall try to burn it."

"And walk home?"

"No. One of my chaps is coming to pick me up."

Ginger stepped in. "Listen, Tony. If you can't get the Hastings off the ground head due north for five miles, find a place to hide and then wait. You'll find an open place big enough for a machine to get in. Our Halifax has already landed there. Algy Lacey is due to land there on Friday—perhaps earlier, perhaps later. The chances are he'll be in an Auster, for easy handling. But he'll get you out somehow."

"Fair enough."

"We shall hear if you get off," said Biggles. "Off you go. Time's precious." 96

"I don't like the idea of leaving our stolen machine

" began the General.

"Please don't waste time arguing, sir," broke in Biggles. "We'll either get your machine or see that no one else gets it."

"Come on, my lot," ordered Tony.

"Good luck," called Biggles.

Tony's party ran on, leaving Biggles with Ginger and Bertie.

"Now, where's this other machine," asked Biggles crisply.

"Over here."

"Right. Go to it. I think I can hear that confounded jeep coming down the track. I'd forgotten about it. It'll come this way, too. Von Stalhein will guess what I shall make for.

"

Ginger set off at the double, taking a route along the edge of the forest on the opposite side of the landing ground from that taken by Tony's party. "Did you see von Stalhein shoot Zorotov?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What a ruthless, cold-blooded devil he is."

"He had to do it to save his life. Zorotov realized what he was doing and was off to tell Christophe. Now von Stalhein will say it was Zorotov who gave us the wire cutters, and he caught him in the act. How much farther have we to go?"

"About a hundred yards."

"Then we'd better steady the pace and pipe down." As they slowed to a quick walk, with anxious glances in front and behind, the lights of the jeep appeared on the edge of the airstrip, at the end of the track. There it appeared to hesitate, as if those in charge were undecided which direction to take; but when the engines of the Hastings started up with a roar it raced, not towards the Hastings as Ginger expected,

ally across the airfield towards the hangar of the secret plane.

"They're going to see we don't get both machines," said Biggles.

"The Hastings is all right, anyway; that's one good thing," remarked Ginger.

"So far—but for how long?" muttered Biggles. "The question is, does the secret weapon function from the ground as well as in the air? That's something I don't know. If it does they'll cut the Hastings' engines again." He set off at a run along the edge of the forest, only to pull up when the Hastings' engines bellowed as it taxied into position for the take-off. "Good!" he exclaimed. "They're away." The jeep raced on to its objective. Men ran to meet it.

"We'd better rest on our oars a minute. We can't tackle that lot, old boy," opined Biggles. Nobody answered. What Bertie had said was so obviously true that Biggles did not dispute it. It was clearly not the moment to try to get possession of the aircraft. The Hastings roared into the air and disappeared in the night sky. Even while Biggles and Ginger were congratulating themselves on this the secret machine came rumbling out of its lair, and taxi-ing out on to the airstrip took off in the wake of the Hastings.

"You know what that means," said Biggles grimly. "It's hoping to cut the Hastings'

engines."

"That's it."

"Tony has a good three minutes start. They can't know which way he's going and they'll never find him in the dark."

"They may not have to find him. It may not be necessary to see him. It all depends on how the weapon

works and, as I said before, that's something we don't know. If it operates on a beam principle Tony-should be all right. But if it broadcasts in all directions then everything will depend on its effective range. It's no use our going on now; we might as well stay here. There's a chance that Christophe may believe everyone escaped



in the Hastings."

"But not von Stalhein."

"No. He knows us too well. But he isn't the boss. Christophe may back his own opinion. Keep quiet. Let's listen. If Tony has to come down he'll crash; and if he hits the deck within ten miles, on a still night like this we should hear it." Nothing more was said. They stood just inside the forest, listening, eyes on the pitiless sky. The drone of aircraft could still be heard in, the distance. Deep in the forest drums were still throbbing.

A QUARTER OF AN HOUR passed without any change in the situation. Everyone seemed to be waiting. A little crowd stood in front of the opening in the trees that gave access to the hangar. The only sounds were the distant drone of aircraft, a low murmur of conversation, and once, for a brief spell, far away, the roaring of two lions. Then an aircraft could be heard coming back. A line of rather feeble landing lights, somewhat surprisingly, outlined the airstrip. There had been nothing to suggest a crash. As Ginger remarked, had the Hastings crashed and caught fire the reflection would have shown on the sky.

"That's Christophe's machine coming," said Biggles. "We'll wait for them to put it to bed and then try to get a closer look at it. The crowd should clear off, but I imagine a guard will be left on the machine. I hate crawling about in the dark, but we've got to get to it, or the hangar, somehow. There is this about it; there's plenty of cover. If I can't get the machine I'll burn the whole works. The General said it wouldn't matter if the weapon was destroyed. That would at least prevent the enemy getting his hands on it and would put an end to Christophe's racket here."

"You don't think he's a genuine patriot?" murmured Bertie. 100

"I doubt it. Money or power, or both, are usually at the bottom of this sort of set-up. Christophe's on a good thing. With the new weapon he's able to get top secrets and sell them to enemy agents. They're no use to him. He's in the one place in Africa where that'd work. That, of course, is why he chose it. Here comes the machine. This fellow Dessalines, or whoever's flying it, must be pretty confident of himself to do night landings on a field this size."

The pilot may have been confident, but confidence is not ability, as the next few minutes were to demonstrate.

The aircraft started its approach too close and too high, although the pilot may not have realized it until too late. The result was, his wheels did not touch until he was half-way down the airstrip, travelling much too fast. It was one of those occasions when a pilot must think on the instant, and act on it. The safe course would have been to open up and go round again. For some reason known only to himself the pilot decided to take a chance on stopping before he ran into the trees. Realizing five seconds later that this was not going to work he started to turn, too sharply. One thing a landing chassis, designed to go forward, will not do, is go sideways. There was a grinding crunch; the machine pulled up as if caught by arresting gear and came to rest with its tail cocked in the air.

"Very pretty," muttered Biggles. "Why did the fool have to do that."

"There is this about it, old boy; the silly ass has put his kite out of action," observed Bertie. "It'll have to stay where it is for a bit."

"That's just it," said Biggles angrily. "Look where it is! How are we going to get near it, stuck out there, away from any sort of cover. If this has upset Christophe's apple-cart it's upset ours as well."

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"I don't see that—dashed if I do."

"If that machine's a write-off Christophe will take the weapon out of it. If he does, where will he put it? We don't know. He won't leave it lying about, you can bet your life on that. It means too much to him—everything, in fact. Confound his ham-fisted pilot for a clumsy twit. Well, I'm not leaving without the weapon or without destroying it. Just a minute. Let me think about this."

By this time most of the people on the airfield were standing by the damaged machine, engaged, as might be expected, in argument. The pilot was, no doubt, explaining what had happened.

"Listen," said Biggles, reaching a decision. "Without an aircraft Christophe's sunk, and he must know it. The only way he can get the weapon into the air is by repairing the machine or installing it in another aircraft, and I can't believe he's got the technicians here to do either. If I'm right, then he'll have to call on his outside pals, as he calls them. These, I imagine, are also von Stalhein's pals. If they come here we've lost the game, because even if they don't get away with the weapon they'll see enough of it to tell them all they want to know. I'd wager that at this very moment von Stalhein is telling Christophe that

he can get the thing fixed up for him. The cards have fallen nicely for him."

"What's the answer to that, old boy?" inquired Bertie.

"There's only one. We've got to stop Christophe or von Stalhein from getting in touch with the people outside."

"How?"

"By busting his radio. That's the only way they can make contact—short of hoofing it through the jungle, which would take time."

"Then let's get on with it."

"No. Ginger's dead on his feet. He was up all last night. He can't do another. He's got to get some sleep. Someone will have to stay with him, and that means you, Bertie. I'll go on my own and wreck the radio."

"If you say so," agreed Bertie, realizing Biggles had made up his mind. "Where shall we wait for you."

"One place seems to be as good as another. It might as well be here. I'll get back as soon as I can. And I'd better start or I shall be too late. If anything goes wrong don't wait for me. Push along and meet Algy as arranged." With that Biggles strode off into the darkness, keeping in the deep shadows along the edge of the forest. Bertie and Ginger watched him go. It went against the grain to see him go alone; but Ginger knew he was right. No one can do without sleep even at the best of times, and the strain of the last few hours had left him, as he told Bertie, just about all in. They found a reasonably comfortable spot at the foot of a tree, and there Ginger, with a sigh of relief, sank down. When exhaustion point is reached comfort is not necessary to induce sleep. Bertie sat on a root to keep watch.

Biggles, walking on, did not think his task should be too difficult. In his pocket was the key to the business. The wire cutters. Without them the job would be almost hopeless, for then the only way into the compound would be through the gate. He had, of course, cut a gap through the wire, but that was on the wrong side of the fence separating the prisoners' quarters from the main compound. The gap would have taken him into the pen, but that was no use, because the radio hut was in the compound, near the big hut in which he had been interrogated by Christophe. With the cutters he would be able to enter or leave the compound from any point that suited him. They were,

therefore, the vital element in the undertaking.

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Another factor in his favour', he thought, was the unlikelihood of his presence being suspected in the camp from which he had just escaped. Christophe, left alone, would, he was sure, have supposed that he had gone off in the Hastings, a mistake that would have made the enterprise comparatively easy. But not von Stalhein. He knew him, and his methods, too well. He would know that he, Biggles, would not leave the district without having achieved his object. He would tell Christophe so, although whether he would be able to convince him of that was another matter. After what had happened von Stalhein's own position might not be too secure, for Christophe was no fool, and he would know that either Zorotov or von Stalhein had let him - down by providing the prisoners with the means to escape.

If it came to that, pondered Biggles, as he made his way cautiously towards the compound, Christophe's own position was not as invulnerable as he probably imagined. The people he had outsmarted, and von Stalhein was one of them, would liquidate him without the slightest hesitation if it was in their interest to do so. At the moment they needed him; and he needed them.

Looking across at the aircraft in the brilliant African moonlight he saw that his judgment of what would happen next was correct. Most of the people who had run to the machine were now moving off, some towards the hangar and others towards the camp. But two, at least, remained, and from their attitudes obviously intended to stay there. Biggles smiled. Christophe was taking no chances by leaving the weapon unattended. He had posted guards. The starting of the jeep's engine caused Biggles to lengthen his stride. Time was important. Christophe might make the sending of a radio signal his first job when he reached his headquarters.

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Biggles got to the track that led to the camp well ahead of the party coming in from the airfield. There, taking a chance, he broke into a run until the compound gate came into sight. As he expected it was open; but he was disappointed to see a sentry standing by it. Not that he wanted to use the gateway. But he wanted to reach the fence without going into the forest where the darkness would make movement difficult. He had never to his knowledge seen the radio hut, but he had heard an engine running and Tony had told him he had

heard Morse coming through near the same place. Actually, there were several huts there. Which was the one that housed the equipment Biggles did not know, but he thought there should be no great difficulty in locating it once he was on the spot. His plan, such as it was, was to get to the nearest point outside the wire and cut a way through. It would only be necessary to cut two or three of the bottom strands to make a gap large enough for him to crawl through. The sound of the jeep coming up the track behind him sent him into the forest. The headlights cut a wedge of light in the darkness, and the vehicle, bumping over the rough ground, passed him within five yards. He could hear Christophe's deep voice saying " Okay—okay," apparently agreeing to some suggestion. As there was no one behind the jeep he advanced another twenty yards, which brought him within a dozen paces of the gate, at which point he again sidestepped into the inky shadow of the trees. The jeep drove into the compound without stopping, as he expected it would. The sentry closed the gate. That, too, was to be expected. It didn't worry him, for With the cutters he was independent of gates. Having closed the gate the sentry turned to watch the jeep. That was the moment for which Biggles was waiting. Hurrying forward, keeping close to the trees ready to

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dodge into them should the sentry turn, he reached his first objective—the fence, with its bordering footpath, along which he began to move, walking sideways so that he could watch the sentry.

Sentry-go is a notoriously boring occupation, and to most of those who have to undertake it, unless under supervision, it is largely a matter of form. Wherefore it is unlikely that any sentry ever remained strictly alert during his full tour of duty—unless, of course, within sight or sound of the enemy. Thus it was with the negro at the gate, safe behind barbed wire. He yawned, lit a cigarette, leaned his rifle against the wire, walked a few yards to a convenient tree stump and sat down.

Biggles, his military training revolting at such behaviour, gave way to a whimsical impulse. The fellow needed a lesson. Retracing his steps he put a hand through the wire, took the rifle, and walked away with it. He didn't want it, so, before he had gone far, he thrust it into a bush. This done he hurried on, going the-reverse way of the path down which he had so recently run with Ginger and the others. The lights of the jeep, now stationary, gave him the position of Christophe's hut, and towards the nearest point of the path to this he now made his way.

So far everything had been easy and looked as if it might continue so. The compound was quiet. There was no activity to suggest that a search was being made for any of the prisoners who might not have got away in the plane. This was understandable, for a search in such country, by night, would have been a waste of time—even if the negro troops had been prepared to attempt one, which was unlikely. In daylight it would be a different matter.

Before he came opposite to Christophe's headquarters, from the windows of which streamed light, Biggles could hear voices raised in argument. He 106

hesitated. To enter the compound at this point would be taking a risk that could be avoided; it would also occupy a minute or two of time, although, as Christophe had not gone direct to the radio hut, perhaps that didn't matter to the extent he had anticipated. To learn the enemy's plans was, he decided, worth the risk involved, so out came the cutters, and in another minute he was crouching in the deep shadow behind the hut. Christophe's deep voice reached him clearly, particularly as he was annoyed, as was understandable. But von Stalhein, ever wary, spoke quietly, and, in fact, implored his companion to do so. In this he defeated his object, fanning Christophe's irritation to wrath.

"What youse afraid of?" demanded Christophe. "De man's gone. He ain't mad. He don come back here no more."

"If you knew the man as well as I do you'd realize the most likely place for him to be at this moment is outside this hut listening to what you're saying." Christophe guffawed.

Biggles smiled.

"All right. You have it your way," agreed Christophe. "You go. But no tricks."

"Don't you trust me?"

"I don't trust no one. Dose prisoners didn't bite tru de wire. Someone gave dem cutters."

"It must have been Zorotov," lied von Stalhein. "Being dead he can't answer to dat," grumbled Christophe.

Biggles waited for no more. He hastened back to the track.

More or less in line with the big hut, farther along, were five similar ones. What their purpose was he did not know, except that one of them was reputed to be the radio room. He knew that none of them was occupied by troops, for the men's barracks was on the 107

far side of the compound. From the prison pen he had seen men going to or coming from them. The only indication he had of his probable objective was a lighted window. If there was an aerial he couldn't see it in the dark. There was no sound to guide him. The 'other huts were unlighted. Assuming that someone would always be on duty at the radio station he thought the lighted hut must be the one. What he was most afraid of now was that Christophe, or one of his men, might go to the hut with a signal before he could get to it.

In fact, as he moved forward he thought this was about to happen. Christophe's door was opened, with a corresponding increase of the noise coming from inside. In the path of yellow light from the open door appeared a grotesque figure wrapped in a leopard skin from which dangled sundry ornaments and—judging from the noise made when the man moved

ironmongery. The man was obviously a chief or witch-doctor, Biggles decided, with command over the outside natives, brought in probably in connexion with the escape and the action to be taken when daylight made 'a pursuit possible. Biggles wasted no time watching but pressed on to as near as he could get to the lighted hut. There the cutters snipped through the four bottom strands of wire. Dragging these back so that they did not get in his way he slithered through and walked quickly to the hut—a matter of perhaps a dozen yards. The door being on the far side he raised an eye to the window. One glance told him all he needed to know. It was the radio station. In a chair, leaning back on two legs against the reception table on which stood a paraffin lamp, was one of Christophe's soldiers, earphones not over his ears but round his neck. He was asleep. No weapon could be seen.

Biggles strode round the hut to the door. One minute, undisturbed, and the job would be done. Gun in hand he opened the door. The operator half opened an eye, opened both eyes wide, started violently and half rose.

With his left hand Biggles pushed him back in the chair. "Sit still," he ordered curtly. When the chair overbalanced and took the man with it to the floor he said : "That's better still. Stay there and you won't be hurt." Then he went to work ripping out connections and sweeping valves to splinters of glass with the butt of his automatic. Then, to

make quite sure, he unscrewed the filling cap of the lamp and poured the paraffin over the instrument. Tearing leaves from a message pad he threw them in the paraffin and with a flick of his lighter set them on fire. To the terrified-looking operator he said: "If you try to leave inside ten seconds you'll meet a bullet coming the other way." Then he looked out. A small group of men was approaching the radio hut from the direction of Christophe's headquarters.

Perceiving that he couldn't reach the gap he had made without being seen he turned the other way, and, as soon as he had the hut between him and the new arrivals, broke into a run. A sudden uproar behind him told him that his sabotage had been discovered. Biggles smiled, for to him it sounded like applause for a job well done. Satisfied that he was now at a safe distance from the hut he took a diagonal course for the fence. That he had not been able to return to his gap was of no importance. With the precious cutters he could get out anywhere, and in a couple of minutes he was back on the path on the right side of the fence. A whimsical thought made him wonder how hard von Stalhein was kicking himself for his folly in producing

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the one tool that had made so much trouble possible—the wire cutters. The grass-thatched roof of the radio hut was now alight, and for that reason introduced a minor difficulty into Biggles's plan, which was to return the way he had come. The fire threw a lurid light for a radius of fifty yards, so there was no possibility of going down the path without being seen. This meant that he could either wait until the fire died down or go back to the gate by taking the opposite direction, which was unknown country. To linger near the fire would obviously increase his danger so he took the second course. Time was no longer particularly important. As long as he got back to the others by dawn, that would do. He set off.

He did not overlook that having the cutters he was not compelled to keep to the path. He could enter the compound at any point he wished. Instead of following the wire round the outside of the camp he could cut straight across the middle of it; but as to do that would mean passing between Christophe's hut on the one side, and the soldiers' living quarters on the other, he did not entertain the idea; but he bore it in mind for an emergency. He carried on along the wire.

BIGGLES HAD TAKEN IT for granted that the wire ran all

round the camp. It was a natural supposition. There had never been



the slightest reason to think otherwise. That this was not the case was revealed when, after walking for about five minutes he nearly fell into a river. In fact, he would almost certainly have done so had not certain . sinister movements set the water moving, so that the ripples gleamed in the faint moonlight that filtered through the branches overhead. He pulled up short, not a little startled, for a number of twin protuberances rising just above the water told him what had caused the sudden turbulence in the water. Crocodiles. He went cold all over when he realized that had the reptiles not moved on his appearance he would have fallen among them; for the water seemed to be stagnant, or nearly so.

He made haste to ascertain the lie of the land, and this is what he found. Christophe, either as part of his defence system or to have an ample supply of water available, had backed his camp on a stream, or possibly the arm of a lake—it was impossible to see which. Anyway, it was quite narrow. Perhaps fifteen to twenty yards across. The barbed wire fence ran down into the water and there it ended. There was no need to continue it along the edge of the water because the crocodiles provided an even more efficacious barrier. That the crocodiles were there was in the natural order of things, for the creatures occur in all West African waters. Garbage thrown in from the camp would no doubt attract them in numbers to this particular spot.

How far this water obstacle extended Biggles was unable to see. Not that it mattered. Ten yards or a hundred yards it was all the same. There could be no question of putting a foot in the water.

It was now evident to him that he could do one of two things. He could go back the way he had come or he could cut the wire and walk along the back of the camp, skirting the river, to the opposite side of the compound—or to the point where the river ended. This, after a pause to weigh up the risks of, both methods, was the course he chose. All he knew about this part of the camp was what he had been able to see from the prison pen. The men's quarters were there. What else there might be he did not know, and he wasted no time guessing. Unfortunately, the moon had passed its zenith, and being below the tops of the tall forest trees left that side of the camp in inky darkness; so there was no question of a reconnaissance from where he stood.

Out came the cutters and he was soon on the inside of the fence, having again only severed the bottom strands. He had a purpose in this. Should he have to retire in a hurry he knew exactly where the gaps he had made occurred, whereas, in the darkness, they would be difficult for anyone else to find. Looking across the compound he

could see that the fire in the radio hut had either burnt itself out or had been extinguished. An orange glow marked the spot. Figures could still be seen moving against it. What concerned him more were torches coming along the path. Anyway, he took them 112

to be on the outside of the wire. Sometimes the torches stopped, from which he gathered the impression that search was being made for gaps. If no gaps were found Christophe would suppose that whoever had smashed the radio was still inside the compound. It was unlikely, Biggles thought, that von Stalhein would tell him that he knew definitely that the escapees had wire cutters, for that would mean explaining how he knew. At present it was only assumed.

The conditions in the compound were more dangerous than would normally have been the case at that hour, when most of the soldiers would be sleeping. That they were now on the move was Biggles's own fault. They had been called out to deal with the fire and the place was buzzing like a disturbed wasps' nest. However, with people on the path there could be no going back, so he pushed on along the river bank, keeping as close as he dare to the water—which, it may be said, was not very close, for stealthy splashings told their own story, and natives were to be preferred to crocodiles. He had a fright when he stumbled and almost fell into what at first he took to be another stream; but it turned out to be only a water-logged piece of ground and he hurried on, kicking slime from his shoes.

The worst part of the trip was now at hand, with the men's huts on the left, and the river cutting off his retreat on the right. In a way the huts served a useful purpose, coming as they did between him and the open part of the compound, where there was most activity. With no one in sight behind the huts he broke into a trot, and a minute later, to his great satisfaction, saw a fence in front of him. This could only mean that he had reached the far side of the compound, where there was no water, or a fence would not be necessary. And so it turned out, the fence beginning at the point where

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the stream turned away. Out came the cutters again and another minute saw him on the path, striding on towards the main gateway, having in his travels completely circumnavigated the camp.

Voices raised in anger and protest in front of him -brought a frown to his forehead until he was close enough to hear what it was about. Just inside the gateway stood a small group of Christophe's soldiers, one of

them, from his manner, an officer or N.C.O. He spoke in coarse negro-American English. The trouble was about a lost rifle. And such was the stream of abuse poured at the sentry who had lost it that Biggles was almost sorry for the wretched fellow—although, of course, he had only himself to blame. Biggles, who was making for the track that led to the landing ground, was now held up until the altercation was concluded, for the row was going on so close to the gate that he could not hope to get past without being seen. Wherefore, at a distance of about ten yards, he drew back a little into the forest to await the end of the business. As a matter of detail he did try to reach the track by feeling his way through the jungle, but after having nearly gouged an eye out on the end of a stick, and treading on something that snapped with an alarming amount of noise, he gave it up and returned to the path just in time to see the arrival of Christophe and his bodyguard, apparently brought to the spot by the argument.

That Christophe was in a nasty mood was hardly surprising after what had happened since sunset, but that was really no excuse for his behaviour when he was informed what the fuss was about. Snatching a cane from his gold-braided lieutenant he set about the miserable sentry in such a passion that Biggles, who, right or wrongly, held himself responsible, found it hard to restrain himself from interference. But still, he 114

consoled himself, the sentry had brought the trouble on his head by his slackness in the first place.

In the end it all turned out for the best, except for the culprit, who staggered away with his hands over his head under a rain of blows. The rest watched, turning their backs on the gate, which gave Biggles an unexpected chance to slip along to the track, which he seized with alacrity, for time was getting on and dawn not far away. Once daylight came, movement, he knew, would be much more difficult.

The rest was comparatively easy. Observing that Christophes plane was not where it had cracked up he paused for a minute to survey the airfield; but it was now the dark hour before sunrise, and seeing nothing of it he held on along the side of the forest for the rendezvous. He went slowly, for he thought there might now be some traffic between the hangar and the compound, so by the time he had reached his objective the first pale streak of the false dawn was creeping up over the horizon.

Of Bertie and Ginger there was no sign, so thinking. he might have been mistaken in the spot he took a pace forward to carry on a little

way. A dead leaf rustled under his foot. Slight though the sound was it must have been heard, for Bertie's voice said softly : "Is that you, Biggles?" The words seemed to come from the air. Biggles looked up and could just make out two vague figures perched on a branch. "What the deuce are you doing up there?" he demanded.

Bertie answered : "Roostin', old boy; roostin'." "What's the idea?"

"You're in the line of march of all the ants in Africa." Biggles looked down. There was now a little light. "I don't see any ants."

"They were there a little while ago."

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"Well they're not here now. Pack up this dicky-bird stuff and come down." Bertie and Ginger dropped to the ground. Ginger explained : "I slept all night. I was still asleep when Bertie hit me a crack and said the place was swarming with ants. Which it was. They were all over us. Not daring to leave the place in case you came back we shinned up that tree. Bertie says he thinks you got the hut. He saw the glow."

"Yes. There wasn't much to it. I don't think Christophe will do any broadcasting tonight—or rather, this morning. What's happened here?"

"A small army of blacks carried the machine, or pushed it on one wheel, to the hangar."

"I wonder why they were in such a hurry to move it. I should have thought that could have been left till daylight. No matter. Are there any biscuits in that bag of yours, Ginger?"

"One or two."

"Then let's have one. I'm hungry after being on the trot all night. Nuisance one has to eat." Remarked Bertie: "Unless we get some grub from somewhere we're all going to be really peckish by the time Algy gets back. What's the drill now?"

"I don't think we dare try anything in daylight. With Christophe's radio scrambled and his aircraft grounded we can afford to have a breather. I could do with a wash."

"I -noticed it," murmured Bertie. "You look as if you'd been wallowing in a bag."

"I have," answered Biggles grimly. "But it wasn't from choice. Let's retire to a distance, as they say. This place isn't going to be a health resort when the black boys start on the warpath, which may happen any time now. What the . . . !" He broke off, as the sudden bellow of aero engines split the early morning hush.

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"Don't say they've repaired the machine already," muttered Bertie.

"That isn't the secret job," declared Ginger. "Sounds more like a—Hastings." His voice trailed off as from under the trees at the far end at the landing ground, on the same side as themselves, appeared, taxi-ing ponderously, an aircraft. It was a Hastings. Naturally, his first thought was for the machine in which Tony and his party had escaped. Biggles soon guessed the truth. "That must be the Hastings in which Tony was forced down when he was flying the General to Dakar. They've had it hidden there all the time." The big transport plane turned, and came on down the side of the forest towards the hangar.

"What are they going to do with it?" asked Ginger, wonderingly.

"Now their own machine is bust I'd say they're going to fit the secret weapon in it—or try to."

"Well, blow me down," breathed Bertie. "That's a bit of a facer, if you see what I mean."

"Yes, that's certainly an unexpected shot out of the locker," agreed Biggles. "Question. What do we do next?" Ginger spoke.

"They're not likely to get the machine into the air today with the weapon fitted so for the moment the position remains unaltered," replied Biggles thoughtfully. "But it will be altered if we stay here much longer, and they start looking for us. There's nothing we can do so let's stick to the original plan and put ourselves where we're less likely to be hunted."

"Don't you think we ought to try to get nearer the place where we're to meet Algy, in case he comes tomorrow?" asked Ginger.

"Definitely," answered Biggles. "I had that in mind. We'll do a big swing round that should put us within

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striking distance of it—say, perhaps somewhere half way between here and there. Come on. Let's be moving —no wait—just a minute. What's all this?" From the track now appeared the jeep. Reaching the airfield it turned directly for the hangar. Seated in the vehicle could be seen, among others, Christophe and von Stalhein. Biggles looked from the jeep to the Hastings, which, with its engines still running, had turned to face the open ground.

"I've a feeling that we may have got this business weighed up all wrong," he said slowly.

"That must be Dessalines, the pilot, just getting down from the Hastings. He's dressed for flying, not for the workshop. Is he going to take von Stalhein somewhere?"

"As there doesn't seem to be anything for von Stalhein to do here—if he simply came over to have a look at you—maybe he's decided to go back to where he came from," volunteered Ginger. "The machine that brought him being out of action, Dessalines is going to take him home in the Hastings."

"That's what it looks like," conceded Biggles. "But there could be another angle to that—

as von Stalhein might see it. Why is he in such a hurry to go? He wants the secret weapon—and he wants it badly. If he leaves here he might never get back. He's a slick customer. Put yourself in his position. That's always a good thing to do to get a line on the enemy's intentions."

"I don't get it," murmured Bertie, polishing his monocle.

"Bluntly, let's assume that Dessalines is going to take von Stalhein to his hide-out, wherever that might be. What's to stop von Stalhein, when the machine lands, from grabbing Dessalines as a sort of hostage, or even coming back here with some of his tough agents to force Christophe's hand. He couldn't get here overland even if he had known where the place was; but he

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knows where it is now, and there would be nothing to stop him coming back by air if he had a machine available."

Ginger looked startled. "Do you think he intends to try something like that?" Biggles shrugged. "I don't know. It could happen. Can you think

of anything to prevent it?"

"No."

"Neither can I. Of this I'm certain. If von Stalhein leaves here it will only be because he's got some scheme on. What makes me suspicious is his anxiety to go—assuming he is going. The secret weapon is still here. He doesn't leave a job in the middle; but obviously he can't do anything single-handed. This hooks up with something I overheard last night outside Christophe's headquarters. I didn't catch what it was, but von Stalhein had evidently put forward a suggestion. Christophe, it seemed to me reluctantly, agreed. He was pretty steamed up at the time. Remember, this was after the secret machine had piled up. Von Stalhein's nimble brain would soon work out his next move, particularly as he knows we're here. With Christophe alone he could afford to take time, but with us in the offing he knows he's no time to lose."

"Well, he's going off in the Hastings, anyway," observed Ginger. The pilot, a coloured man, had climbed back into his seat. Von Stalhein was standing at the door shaking hands with Christophe. He got in. The door was shut. The aircraft taxied out for its run. In three minutes it was in the air, climbing for height.

"Christophe thinks he's smart," said Biggles softly. "What a hope he's got against that shrewd unscrupulous plotter he just shook hands with. Well, I warned him. But like most people who think they're clever he

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wouldn't listen. He's got a lesson coming, if I know anything."

"What are we going to do about it, old boy?" inquired Bertie.

"Yes. What?" said Biggles softly. "The business now hangs on how long the Hastings is going to be away. It might be an hour, it might be a day. We'd better not get too far away. Let me think."

Biggles's decision was soon made. "You know I'm always against breaking up the party because it isn't easy to get together again, but here I think we shall have to. We can't be here and at the rendezvous with Algy at the same time. For a start we'll get to a safer distance, but near enough to hear the Hastings if it comes back. Then, Bertie, I'll ask you to push along and wait for Algy. We can't have him blundering into this, looking for us, if we're not there to meet him. That's what

would happen. I'll keep Ginger with me because he's got the radio. Let's move off. We'll settle the details presently." In single file they set off through the forest.

WITH BIGGLES LEADING the way, gun in hand ready, for

trouble, they pushed on for about half a mile, when the open country appeared ahead. This, as they realized, was more dangerous ground, for anyone or anything moving across it would, unless an obstacle intervened, be in view of scouts on the edge of the forest. Even as they halted they saw a body of half a dozen blacks moving towards the forest, but on a line that would take them well to one side.

Biggles stopped. "I'm afraid this is going to be awkward," he remarked. "We'd better let those fellows get clear before we show ourselves. Actually, I shan't go much farther. We shall have to keep handy to see what goes on should the Hastings come back. It came this way. I'd like to know where it was bound for. I mean, in whose territory, and on what sort of airfield, official or unofficial."

"What aerodromes are there in Liberia?" asked Ginger.

"There's a proper airport at Monrovia, the capital."

"The coast seems clear; what about me pressing on before the sun gets really cracking," suggested Bertie.

"All right," agreed Biggles. "We'll see you out of the danger zone and then work our way back a bit. In doing that we shall act as a rearguard for you." 121

"What do I tell Algy, old boy?"

"Tell him to stand fast until we join you. It's no use him coming here. There's nowhere to land except on Christophe's flat patch."

"Right you are."

"You keep an eye behind us, Ginger," ordered Biggles as the march was resumed. "Bertie, you watch the flanks. I'll watch ahead. If we're attacked we shall have to fight it out. I'm not standing still to be skewered like a chicken. In his present mood Christophe will be good enough for any devilment."

They went on for about a mile, seeing nothing of interest except vultures fighting over the remains of a kill, made presumably by lions.



Biggles stopped. "We'll wait here for a bit to see you on your way, Bertie, then we'll go back," he said. "Watch your step."

"Good enough. So long." Bertie continued on his march north.

"It looks as if we shall have to tighten our belts until Algy gets back," remarked Biggles, as they waited. "I didn't reckon on being out of touch for as long as this. However, something may turn up. Water may be a more pressing problem." They gave Bertie a quarter of an hour, at the end of which time, after a thorough reconnaissance of the landscape, they started to retrace their steps, keeping going until a clump of tamarisk offered shade from the sun, which was now fierce. This was perhaps three hundred yards from the edge of the forest.

"I'd have expected rather more activity than this," observed Biggles, surveying the shimmering landscape. "It begins to look as if Christophe thinks we all went off in the Hastings. Von Stalhein, as I said before, would know better, but he may not have told Christophe. I wonder what he's up to. He's some scheme on."

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You never know what he's going to pull out of the hat."

They sat down and finished the remains of the food in Ginger's bag. There was very little. The day wore on. The sun toiled across the heavens. The air danced under its heat. Nothing happened. Ginger, who was getting really thirsty, voiced the opinion that they wouldn't last the day without a drink.

"If the worst comes to the worst we'll make for that crocodile river I told you about," said Biggles. "It runs round the back of the camp. Frankly, I don't know what to make of this. I expected von Stalhein back before this. It'd suit us if he didn't get back today at all, because once it gets dark I shall try for a close look at the hangar. If we could destroy the weapon there'd be nothing to keep us here. We could pull out and join Bertie." The day wore on wearily to its close. The heat was intense. The flies, of one sort or another, were merciless. Ginger suffered from thirst; and so, no doubt, did Biggles, although he didn't mention it. Occasional parties of hunting natives revealed the danger of looking for water. One party passed close. The only animals seen were some zebra, in the distance, galloping as if they had been disturbed.

"I hope I haven't got this all wrong," muttered Biggles, about sundown. "Von Stalhein should have been back before this—if he's coming back."

He got here quickly enough when Christophe told him I was here."

"He'll come back all right," declared Ginger confidently. "He's not likely to abandon the secret weapon. My guess is, it's taking him a little time to get organized for a showdown with Christophe."

"Could be," agreed Biggles. "We'll move as soon as it gets properly dark. First we'll make for the stream

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and try to get a drink. Then we'll tackle the hangar—probably set fire to it. That shouldn't be difficult, with everything bone dry. If we can manage that we'll follow Bertie and wait for Algy. We haven't much longer to wait. Queer how the time hangs when you're doing nothing. This—just a minute! What's this coming?"

A murmur of voices, speaking loudly and sometimes raised as if in triumph, came drifting through the stagnant air. Nothing could be seen as yet, however, for -the sound, still some way off, came from beyond the thickest part of the tamarisks, which obstructed their view. This difficulty was easily overcome. They pushed their way through them, and the source of the noise was instantly revealed. At a distance of rather more than a hundred yards, striding through the gathering gloom, was a group of perhaps a dozen blacks, waving their spears. Sometimes one would break into a dance. The reason for this jubilation was evident. In the middle of the group walked a man who seemed to be on the point of exhaustion. He was a white man, and it needed no second look to identify him. It was Bertie. Even as they watched a native prodded him in the back with his spear.

For a moment Ginger was speechless, shocked with consternation, for it seemed futile to tackle such a mob even though the blacks were armed only with spears. "How on earth—

" he began.

Biggles cut him -short. "Never mind wondering. They've got him. We've got to get him, or with Christophe in his present mood he'll kill him, if nothing worse."

"They're taking him to the camp?"

"Of course."

"We couldn't get near them without them seeing us coming."

"We can't tackle them here, that's obvious. Wait till

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they're behind that next patch of scrub. Then we'll make a bolt for the forest and take them on from cover. Our only chance is to scatter them in a panic at the first jump. If it means fighting it out, that's how it will have to be. Don't forget those devils killed Vic Roberts and young Laxton. We can't leave Bertie in their hands. There they go. This is it. Come on."

So saying Biggles broke cover and sprinted for the forest, Ginger at his heels. Three hundred yards can be a long way. In the present circumstances it seemed to Ginger more like a mile. Often he stumbled on the rough ground. Once he fell, knocking most of the breath out of his body, for the sun-baked earth was like iron. Once he nearly tripped over a small animal that rushed across his path. The trouble was, in running it was necessary to keep one eye on the scrub behind which the natives had disappeared from sight, in order to mark their reappearance. When that happened they both went flat until more bushes intervened. However, gasping for breath and half blinded with perspiration they reached the forest, without—judging from the unbroken voices of the blacks—being discovered.

Biggles didn't stop, but tore on, dodging obstacles and ducking under branches. Beneath the trees it was nearly dark, which didn't make progress any easier. Blundering over fallen debris and struck in the face by twigs, to Ginger the thing began to take on some form of madness. He thought his heart would burst, but the plight of Bertie kept him going. That and the fact that Biggles seemed\_ indefatigable. In an emergency he always did. His endurance, when circumstances demanded it, was still to Ginger a thing to wonder at. From his physical appearance one would not have suspected it. It could only be, thought Ginger vaguely, a matter of brain over brawn.

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Reaching the edge of the airstrip Biggles stopped to listen. In a moment he was on again, guided by the noise the victorious blacks were making. Again he stopped, head up, listening, mud to the waist, face grimy, chin unshaven. He went on a little way to where a barely perceptible path ran out of the forest. "This is the way they're coming," he said tersely. "You stay there. I'll go the other side. When I shout, fire two shots over their heads. I'll do the same. If they bolt, okay. If not, shoot to kill, and shoot fast, covering Bertie. It'll be them or us for

it. They won't hesitate to kill us if they can. Got any spare cartridges?"

"Three clips."

"Give me one."

Ginger passed a clip.

"Thanks. Here they come."

For three or four minutes they waited, the noise drawing nearer, Ginger fighting for breath, wiping sweat from his face with his sleeve. Then, out of the forest came the blacks, still laughing, one still prodding Bertie, who was swaying on his feet, with the blunt end of his spear.

"Now ! " shouted Biggles, and his gun streamed flame. Three more shots followed like a volley.

Most of the blacks broke at once, either running back down the track or diving into the forest; but some, perhaps too startled to move, stood their ground, eyes showing the whites in their astonishment.

Curiously, Bertie was the first to move. He spun round, grasped the spear of the man who had been tormenting him, tore it from his hands and flung it at him, crying : "Now hold that, you blighter."

Biggles dropped a native who looked like showing fight and Ginger shot another who was in the act of throwing a spear at him. The two survivors fled. 126

"Hold 'em off, Ginger." rapped out Biggles. "Come on, Bertie." Ginger emptied his gun at random into the trees and slipped in a fresh clip of ammunition. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that Bertie was in a pretty bad way. His face was chalk white. There were ugly stains on his jacket. Biggles got an arm round him. "Cover the rear, Ginger," he said crisply, and after going a few yards turned into the forest. This was necessary, for through the gloom, from the far side of the landing ground, figures were running towards the spot, as was only to be expected, for the onset had taken place in view of the hangar entrance although a good way from it.

In the forest Bertie shook himself free. "I'm all right, old boy," he protested. "Absolutely top-hole. You press on. I'll follow on."

"Follow nothing," muttered Biggles, linking an arm through Bertie's.

"Lean on me. This is going to be a hot spot in a minute so we'll weave a bit farther if you can manage it." And so they went on, slowly, Ginger bringing up the rear, gun half raised ready for a snap shot should they be molested.

What with the slow progress, the darkness—for it was now pitch black under the trees—and the heat, the next half-hour was a nightmare. Bertie managed to keep on his feet. He said not a word. Ginger knew Biggles must be making for the stream. How he kept his direction he couldn't imagine. After a time, as night closed in, they moved out into the open, and progress was easier. The jeep had appeared at the far end of the landing ground. Ginger could see the headlamps, which told them, roughly, the position of the compound, towards the rear of which they were heading.

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By the time they reached the stream Ginger himself was about all in.

"Here we are," said Biggles softly.

Bertie, who had been stumbling more and more often, sank down.

"Where are you hurt?" asked Biggles.

"A stinker jabbed me in the back with his beastly skewer—nothing serious—but I've lost a spot of the old red juice, I'm afraid. Bit groggy at the knees, that's all. Shall be all right when I've had a breather."

"Stand fast," said Biggles, and disappeared into the darkness. Presently Ginger could hear splashings, as though he was throwing things into the water. Biggles came back with his shirt in his hand, dripping. Having no vessel for carrying water he had soaked it. He made Bertie lie back, and after wringing some water into Bertie's mouth, mopped his face. He then made Bertie lie on his face while he removed his shirt, and in the light of a shielded match, examined his back.

"Not too bad," he reported, putting the wet shirt on the wound. "You stay like that for a bit till the bleeding stops. We're staying here. It's as good as anywhere."

"I'm as good as new after that drink," declared Bertie. "By jingo, I was dry."

"I'm a bit raspy in the mouth myself," admitted Biggles. "Come on, Ginger, let's go and get a drink. Shan't be a minute, Bertie."

Biggles and Ginger went to the stream, where each took turn throwing pieces of dead wood into the water while the other drank. No crocodiles were seen but no chances were taken. Biggles said he thought the brutes probably congregated behind the soldiers' huts for the garbage that was thrown in. Much refreshed, although the water was warm and brackish, they returned to Bertie, and sat down beside him.

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"What happened?" asked Biggles.

Bertie smiled weakly. "You never saw anything so daft in your life," he murmured. "I got to the bally landing ground, and was making for the bushes, when round the corner came a rhino—probably the one you had a poop at, Ginger, to get him to move on. He must live there. We met sort of face to face. The blighter didn't like me—no, by Jove. He squealed like a stuck porker and came for me fiat out in a cloud of dust and small pebbles. I ran like a lamplighter into the bushes and stuff me with a suet pudding if I didn't barge right into the middle of the Kentucky Minstrels having a picnic. Couldn't do a thing about it. We had a lovely scrum for half a minute, and then, there I was, up the creek without a paddle, with the stinkers sitting on me. And by Jove! did they stink. I thinks to meself, Bertie, me lad, this is where you're the board in a dart game; instead of which the silly asses decided to take me home to show the kids what they'd caught. That'

s all, old boy. I'm dashed sorry to give you so much trouble."

"The only trouble is, there will be nobody on the spot to meet Algy when he rolls up. He'

ll get in a flap, and as like as not come looking for us."

"He'll wait a bit before he does anything drastic," asserted Ginger confidently. "He said he would."

"I hope he does," said Biggles earnestly. "If he comes here with the place all steamed up, he's likely to bump into trouble in a big way." He thought for a moment. "I don't think we need be in a hurry to move from here. It's as good as anywhere. Later on, after the moon'

s up and we can see what we're doing, we might move a bit nearer to the hangar. At least, I assume they have some sort of shelter for the machine. I can't understand why von Stalhein hasn't come back. What's he up to all this time. Even if he didn't intend to come 129

b Jessalines, or whatever his name is, would have come home to roost. No matter. We shall know all about it tomorrow, or I'm no good at guessing. How are you feeling, Bertie?"

"Fine."

"Able to move a bit, presently?"

"I wouldn't guarantee to beat Bannister over a mile but I'll be able to hobble along when you say the word."

"Good enough."

Silence fell. Far away a lion roared. In the forest drums muttered sullenly. Ginger rested his chin in his hands and dozed fitfully.

BIGGLES WAITED until the moon was riding high and then moved the party nearer to the hangar, keeping just inside the forest. It was painfully slow work, but it would have been dangerous to expose themselves in the open. The reason for the move was, he explained, he wanted to reconnoitre the hangar, but was anxious not to be too far away from them should a sudden emergency arise.

If he could get close enough to the secret machine, or the hangar that housed it, he said, he would set fire to it. He felt sure that the hangar, if in fact one existed at all, would be of a flimsy nature, of wooden construction, with a thatched roof which should be dry enough to burn readily. If he could do that the show would be over as far as they were concerned. All that would remain would be for them to get home as best they could. Which really meant getting to the rendezvous with Algy who would pick them up. That, Biggles was aware, although he did not say so, was likely to be more difficult than appeared on the face of it; for Bertie, he suspected, was feeling worse than he pretended. He had no serious wound, but he had several cuts in the back as a result of being prodded along by the natives with the points of their spears. He had lost a certain amount of blood and was near,

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to exhaustion, if not collapse. He was in urgent need of medical attention but at the moment they were powerless to do anything about it. They hadn't any first aid kit, or even a bandage. The medicine chest was in the aircraft. It would have been an awkward thing to carry about with them.

In his heart Biggles doubted if Bertie would be able to walk to the

rendezvous, and he and Ginger, alone, would certainly not be able to carry him. It would take them all their time to get there unencumbered. The alternative was to bring the machine to Christophe's airfield, a project, as things were, too desperate for serious consideration. Wherefore Biggles was worried. But not for a moment did he lose sight of his purpose, which was to prevent von Stalhein, or those for whom he worked, getting possession of America's latest secret weapon. At any cost that had to be prevented, and the only way, now, of preventing it, was to destroy it; and the best way of destroying it would be by a fire of such heat that the smaller component parts, at least, and certainly the electrical installation, would be either melted or charred beyond recognition.

"Listen, chaps," he said. "I'm going to have a look round. You're as safe here as anywhere within a mile of the compound so sit tight. I shall get back as soon as I can. If I'm not back by daylight you can reckon you're on your own, in which case you'll have to act as you think best. Should that happen I suggest that you, Ginger, leave Bertie here while you go to meet Algy and put the position to him. He can then either fly to Accra for help, or, with you, try to pick Bertie up. That'll be up to him. Don't forget that in all probability von Stalhein will be back here by then. I think that's about all, unless you have anything to say."

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"No, I've nothing to say," replied Ginger.

"Don't worry about me, old boy," said Bertie, weakly. "I'm all right. Sorry to be such a beastly nuisance, and all that."

"You couldn't be a nuisance if you tried, you big stiff," Biggles told him. He threw a meaning glance at Ginger and walked away.

He began a long, slow, cautious approach to the objective. It was some time before the sound of voices, and lights moving about amongst the trees, told him that he was getting near. From the general buzz of activity it was evident that he had no hope of finding the hangar deserted, or guarded by only one or two sentries. Not that he had entertained such a hope, for after all that had happened it was only to be expected that Christophe would take every possible precaution to see that he did not lose the one thing on which his ambitions depended—the secret weapon. And, Biggles suspected, he trusted von Stalhein no more than he trusted anyone else, for he represented the people whom he had cheated in the first place to get possession of the prototype aircraft with the new device. That he may have felt justified



in cheating, knowing that he himself would be cheated in due course, made no difference.

Biggles moved on towards the lights, peering and blinking through eyes that were now heavy from lack of sleep. He was, although it is unlikely that he would have admitted it, nearly at the end of his strength, and was holding on by sheer will power. No man can go on indefinitely without sleep. Nor can a man live on his nerves alone, however hard he may try to do so.

Biggles edged his way forward, and there before him was his objective—the hangar, such as it was. His heart sank as he looked at it, for the activity in and around it settled once and for all any-idea of approach. Christophe, definitely, was taking no chances. There were at least a score of soldiers there, some sitting, some walking about. There were also some nondescript natives and, watching the scene, a party of the forest tribesmen.

The hangar was little more than a palm-thatched roof supported by poles, which it overhung. A halfhearted attempt had been made to fill in the sides with interlaced branches, but, having been carelessly done, most of these had fallen away with the result that the interior was plain to see. There stood the secret machine, propped up more or less in flying position but a bit lopsided. Some men were working on it, although what they were doing, or trying to do, was not evident. Whatever it was, they were making a good deal of noise about it, as is the way of natives the world over. The machine had been put in nose first. Stacked in front of it, which was actually the rear of the improvised hangar, were a number of petrol and oil drums. Biggles stared at them. He was amazed. Also he was shocked. Even knowing how careless natives could be with inflammable and explosive objects he thought Christophe would have had more sense than to leave large quantities of petrol in a place where men walked about smoking. Naturally, he had wondered where the oil and petrol necessary to service the machine was kept, and had assumed it would be in a separate building. Not for a moment had it occurred to him that it might be right beside the machine. In one way it might appear to be a wonderful piece of , luck in view of what he intended to do. But there was another side to it. Placed as they were he had no more hope of getting near them than he had of getting near the machine. In a vague sort of way, as he now realized, 134

he had reckoned on finding the petrol store unguarded, which would have offered possibilities.

He looked at the petrol drums longingly; but there could be no question of getting near them. He looked at the roof. That, too, would only need a match to set it on fire, he could see. There was no hope of getting near that, either. In any case he would not be able to reach it. Even if he did manage to set it on fire, he reflected, it would be possible for the men, if they kept their heads, to drag the aircraft out before it was affected. They might not keep their heads if he opened fire on them, he pondered. But that was a forlorn hope, he decided, to be considered only in dire emergency if all else failed. There should be a better way.

Having learned all he needed to know about the place he backed away and leaned against a tree while he thought the matter over. In the end he was forced to admit to himself that there was nothing he could do while the present conditions prevailed. With daylight, perhaps, some of the men would go. There would be duties at the camp. He returned to where he had left the others.

Ginger was awake. Bertie was muttering in his sleep. Biggles felt his forehead, his pulse.

"He's running a temperature," he announced softly.

Ginger nodded.

"That settles any argument about him walking to the aircraft," said Biggles. "By tomorrow he'll probably be in a high fever."

"How did you find things?" inquired Ginger.

"Hopeless. The place is buzzing like a Woolworth store on a Saturday morning. The hangar has a thatched roof, as we thought. One match in the right place would be enough to set it alight; but the problem is how to get the match to it. You couldn't get within twenty yards of it without being seen."

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"What about the old Indian trick?"

"What trick?"

"Shooting a blazing arrow into it. That's how they do it in books and on the films."

"So I believe. But this isn't a book and it isn't a film. I've always had a

feeling that it isn't as easy as it looks. Moreover, not being Indians we don't walk about with bows and arrows in our equipment."

"I don't see why we shouldn't make one. After all, it needn't be very efficient. I mean, it wouldn't have to have a very long range. There's no shortage of wood." Biggles became interested. "You know, laddie, I think you may have got something. What could we use for string?"

"I've got some flex with the radio in my bag."

"That should do fine. Get it out and untwist a yard or so. I'll see about cutting some sticks. We might as well try it as sit here twiddling our thumbs." As Ginger had said, there was no shortage of wood; but it was not easy to find a sort that would suit their purpose. At the end Biggles made his way to a clump of bamboos which he recalled seeing. These provided both the bow and the arrows, although he had to put in some hard work with his penknife to saw them to the proper lengths. However, in something under an hour they had a fairly serviceable bow. Its range was short, but, they thought, sufficient. Tufts of dry grass were tied to half a dozen headless arrows, not without difficulty, for the moonlight was failing.

"I'd say that's just the job," declared Ginger enthusiastically.

"I'll try it, anyhow," said Biggles.

"May I come with you?" pleaded Ginger. "I've

always wanted to see if this really worked," he added.

Biggles looked at Bertie. He was still asleep. "All

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right," he agreed. "We shan't be away long whatever happens." He glanced at the sky. "It'

s clouding up. It'll be as black as pitch under the trees. We'll take a chance and start along the outside or it'll be daylight before we get there."

With Ginger at his heels he set off, and most of the distance was covered without difficulty and without incident. Just short of the hangar he turned into the trees, and after an awkward ten minutes was once more on the fringe of the light that came from it. Two more steps would have taken them into the open. The conditions were

precisely the same as when he had last seen the place, except that more of the men were sitting down. Some appeared to be asleep.

Whispering to Ginger : "This is as near as we dare go," he fitted an arrow to the bowstring. "Have you any matches?"

"Yes."

"Strike one. Keep it shielded with your hands." Ginger complied. Biggles lighted the tuft on his arrow, took quick aim and sent it flying.

It flew well enough, and landed on the roof. But by that time the tuft was no longer alight, the rush through the air having put it out. It smoked for a moment. The smoke died away.

"That," said Biggles grimly, "is just what I thought would happen. On these films you talk about they get it better organized."

"Try another," urged Ginger. Another was tried, with the same result.

"Keep going," said Ginger.

"Presently," answered Biggles, "someone is going to notice one of these flaming arrows, when it will be us who'll have to keep going." All the same, he fitted another arrow and sent it on its way.

This one stayed alight, but unfortunately the point

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had entered the thatch at such an angle that the burning tuft was at least a foot away from it. For a minute they watched it hopefully, hoping it would fall, or that a spark would drop on the thatch.

But all that fell were some big spots of rain. Within a minute the rain was bucketing down.

Biggles threw the bow away with an exclamation of disgust. "Now you see the difference between your precious films and real life," he muttered.

"Pity," murmured Ginger. "It might have worked but for this confounded rain."

"Never mind what it might have done," returned Biggles. "After this deluge it'll need a tin of petrol to set anything alight. We might as well get back to Bertie for all we can do here now."

For a minute or two longer they stood watching the scene. Then, wet through, and thoroughly uncomfortable, for the rain was icy cold, they made their way back to Bertie. Just as they reached him the rain stopped as abruptly as it had begun. The moon swung clear of the cloud.

As they huddled together, shivering, Bertie opened his eyes and asked: "How did it go?"

"It didn't," answered Biggles, sadly.

"Bad luck," said Bertie.

Ginger, hunched up, chin in his hands, gazed at the sky, wondering what the morning would bring. None of his conjectures, it may be said, were anywhere near the truth. DAWN CAME with a clear sky to find them stiff, weary and hungry, with Bertie running a mild fever.

Biggles hoped that some of the men who had been guarding the hangar would now return to the compound, instead of which, as he stood waiting and watching, Christophe arrived on the scene in the jeep. He got everyone on the move with a stream of orders and then surveyed the sky in a way which brought from Biggles the remark: "He's expecting someone to arrive by air. I can only imagine it will be von Stalhein in the Hastings, with some mechanics. It's quite certain Christophe won't be able to do anything about the damaged machine without professional help."

"Well, let's hope it comes soon, so that we can get this business settled one way or the other," said Ginger despondently. "I was never so browned off in my life. This doing nothing is slow death."

"That's better than sudden death," stated Biggles cheerfully. "We're still on our feet. That'

s something." "What are we going to do?"

"What can we do? If we couldn't do anything last night we can't do anything in broad daylight, with people milling round the place. We shall just have to wait." Ginger looked at Biggles. Never had he seen him in

such a state. His hair was matted on his head. His face was streaked with mud and drawn with strain. His eyes were bloodshot from need

of rest and his shirtless torso marked with scratches and mosquito bites. Ginger realized that his own appearance must be much the same. He also realized that they were near the end of their physical resources. Hunger gnawed at his stomach, but there was not a crumb of food left in the bag with which to satisfy it.

The light grew stronger.

Biggles stiffened and raised a hand as from the deep shadow of the trees behind them came a soft patter of footsteps on the fallen leaves. Ginger drew a deep breath of relief when presently the cause revealed itself. It was a monkey. For a few seconds it did not see them, but continued searching diligently for grubs under the leaves. When it did spot them it leapt into the nearest tree giving vent to its disapproval in a staccato chatter that was obviously a stream of abuse.

Biggles frowned. "Shut up, you little blighter," he told it. The monkey flew into a screaming fury.

Biggles glanced anxiously in the direction of the hangar. "If that bad-tempered little rascal goes on like that we've had it," he told the others. "The natives will know what it means. If they don't they'll come to find out."

A second monkey arrived. He, too, apparently, was curious to know what the fuss was about. Having ascertained he joined in the scolding.

Biggles shrugged his shoulders helplessly. There was nothing they could do about it. Presently there were half a dozen monkeys sitting on a branch indulging in a chorus of recrimination. Some birds, also presumably attracted by the clamour, arrived on the scene. They swore at the monkeys.

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The monkeys swore back, and the din rose to a crescendo.

"The blacks may think they're mobbing a lion or something," suggested Bertie hopefully. Biggles moved to the edge of the forest and took a peep. "Some have walked out into the open and are looking this way," he reported. "I'm afraid this is where " He broke off as the distant drone of an aircraft approaching took his eyes to the sky.

"Now we shall soon know the worst," observed Ginger lugubriously.

"As things at the moment are about as dim as they could be, anything

that happens should be an improvement," returned Biggles, optimistically. The monkeys were forgotten.

The machine turned out to be the Hastings, as was expected. It landed, swung round at the end of its run, and taxied ponderously towards the hangar, from which everyone had emerged to watch. At a distance of perhaps thirty yards it stopped.

"There's a white man flying that aircraft—I can just see his face," said Biggles suddenly.

"I wonder what's happened to Dessalines."

No one answered.

The exit door of the aircraft opened and von Stalhein jumped down.

"So he has come back," said Biggles.

"Yes, and with what sort of dirty card up his sleeve," replied Ginger, little guessing what it was and how soon it was to be exposed.

Von Stalhein was followed out of the machine, in swift succession, by six or seven men. Ginger didn't count them. They were white men, and his lips parted, and his eyes opened wide, when the truth hit him. For every man was armed with an automatic rifle. They fanned out advancing slowly.

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"For Pete's sake!" exclaimed Biggles, in a strangled sort of voice. "They can't be thinking—"

He got no further. At a word of command every man of the newcomers opened fire. The hangar and its immediate surroundings were raked with bullets. There was no challenge. No warning. Death streamed from the muzzles of the guns. Never was a surprise attack more devastating, or more successful. Christophe fell at the first burst. His wretched troops, overwhelmed from the start, and knowing it, hardly fired a shot. Some fell. The rest fled.

Ginger, stunned, bewildered, horrified, could only stare aghast. So this was von Stalhein'

s answer.

But Biggles was moving, his eyes blazing. "The murdering hounds," he

rasped. "Stay here with Bertie." With that he dashed along inside the forest towards the hangar. Dodging and ducking under low branches, skidding on the layer of wet leaves, he tore on, for the purpose of the attack was never in doubt. Von Stalhein had come for the secret weapon. He would be thinking it was his. Well, he hadn't got it yet. By the time Biggles had reached the hangar the firing had ceased, presumably because there was no one left to shoot at. He approached from the rear, and for that reason, on account of the foliage, he could not see what was going on outside. There was no one inside. Any men who had been there must have bolted at the first onset. Moving forward a little he saw the attackers closing in, von Stalhein with them. All were looking about them, perhaps fearing a counter-attack from the forest.

Biggles, in the deep shadow of the trees, dropped on his hands and knees, and keeping the stack of petrol drums between him and the entrance went on until he was close behind them. The reek of petrol struck his

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nostrils, and with savage satisfaction he perceived that some of them, struck by bullets, were leaking. One, almost riddled, fairly gushed petrol. He rose, and putting his foot against it, sent it rolling down under the nose of the aircraft, spilling its contents as it went.

Von Stalhein must have seen it. At all events, he rushed forward, and, of course, saw Biggles. He let out a shout.

Biggles yelled back, "Look out !" and holding the muzzle of his gun close against the ground where the petrol had been spilled, pulled trigger, at the same time leaping back, for he knew what was likely to happen. Nor was he mistaken. There was a terrific whoof as the petrol exploded. Biggles just caught sight of von Stalhein taking aim at him when a sheet of flame leapt between them. Some shots were fired. Biggles didn't know where the bullets went. He thought they went over him, for he was once more on his hands and knees scrambling back into the forest.

As soon as he was inside he jumped up, and bending low, ran for his life, travelling at an angle from the now blazing building. For two hundred yards or so he plunged on, and then fell from sheer exhaustion, getting his breath back in great gulps, but watching and listening for sight or sound of pursuit.



There was plenty of noise, above all the roaring and crackling of the burning hangar and its contents : but he saw nobody, so whether or not he was being pursued he did not know. There was a lot of shouting and he thought it might be von Stalhein urging his men to try to save the machine. He didn't worry about that. He had stood too many times by burning aircraft not to know the fearful heat produced. He imagined that the last thing Christophe would have provided himself with was fire-fighting equipment. He went on a little way and rested again, although

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strangely enough, under the influence of excitement or success he felt less tired than he had been. The relief at knowing the secret plane was destroyed was a wonderful restorative. To be on the safe side he allowed a little time to elapse before he made his way back to where he had left the others, and then by a circuitous route. He found them in a state of palpitating anxiety, for they had of course heard the uproar but had no idea of what had happened beyond the obvious fact that the hangar had gone up in flames. They were still in the same place.

Ginger greeted Biggles with a weak grin. "You pulled it off?" \_

"Yes." Biggles's face cracked in a smile. "And singed my front hair off at the same time."

"Good show, old boy—jolly good show," murmured Bertie.

"What's happening, Ginger; can you see?" asked Biggles. With the peculiar smell of smouldering aircraft ashes in his nostrils he moved a little nearer to the edge of the clearing so that he could see for himself.

Through a pale blue smudge of drifting smoke he could see the Hastings standing where it had stopped, its engines still ticking over. Close to it, in earnest conversation, were von Stalhein and his men. Apparently there had been no casualties among them. Christophe still lay where he had fallen. Some of his troops were there, too, around the entrance to the hangar.

"There'll be a nice old row about this when the news gets out," opined Biggles.

"We didn't do it," protested Ginger.

"No, but the people responsible will try to put the blame on us—they always do." 144

"I couldn't care less," averred Bertie. "They're all a lot of scallywags."

"What's more to the point," put in Ginger, "do you think von Stalhein will set this lot to look for us? We aren't out of the wood yet."

"From the way they're standing there I'd say no," answered Biggles. "We might be anywhere. He doesn't know we're practically immobilized. What hope would he have of finding us in miles of jungle? That's probably what they're discussing now. Besides, after what's happened, to go into the forest would be asking to be bumped off by the blacks. I'

d say it's more likely that von Stalhein will be anxious to remove himself as quickly as possible from the horrible mess he's made here."

"The sooner the better," muttered Ginger.

"I wonder where he picked that lot up," went on Biggles. "By thunder ! It's come to a nice thing when he can collect an armed force on someone else's territory. Well, we can't do anything till they go. It looks as if they're getting ready to go now."

"That suits me," said Ginger warmly. "The sooner we're out of this the better."

"There's nothing more he can do here, anyway," remarked Biggles. "Yes. There they go," he continued, as von Stalhein and his private army began to file into the machine. "In one way I'm a bit disappointed. At the back of my mind I had a wild hope that they'd go to Christophe's headquarters, leaving the machine unguarded, in which case we might have grabbed it. That would have left them stuck here, and at the same time saved us a lot of leg work."

The door of the aircraft was closed. The engines were revved up. The machine taxied to the end of the runway, turned and took off.

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"Good-bye and good riddance," said Ginger. He looked at Biggles. "Now what's the drill?"

"I'm going to meet Algy and bring him here. Bertie's in no shape for a long march."

"Why not let me go? I've had some sleep."

"I'll go," decided Biggles. "You stay here and take care of Bertie. Before I start I'd better have a look at what's left of the secret plane, to see what sort of job I've made of it." Ginger went with him. "How about trying to contact Algy by radio?" he suggested, as they walked along.

"No. You might sit here fiddling for hours, and then not get him if he happened to be already on the ground."

There was no need to go close to the hangar. It was completely burnt out, as were the trees nearest to it. Of the aircraft, only the metal skeleton remained, which was not surprising considering the quantity of petrol and oil involved in the conflagration. The whole area was a black, smouldering mass. Even the earth was smoking.

"Anybody's welcome to that," observed Biggles, turning away. "Hello!" he went on quickly. "Christophe's moving. He isn't dead after all."

"I wouldn't go near him," warned Ginger. "If he's got a gun he's likely to shoot you."

"We can't leave the wretched fellow lying there wounded," protested Biggles. "Have a heart. Poor old Christophe! His empire didn't get far. Well, he can't say I didn't warn him. You go back and take care of Bertie. I shan't be long."

As Biggles walked over to him Christophe raised himself on an elbow. There was no malice on his face. He looked crushed by the blow that had fallen. "So you're still aroun',

" he greeted.

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"Of course," answered Biggles. "Are you badly hurt?"

"I got one in de shoulder and one in de leg," explained the negro. "I'd a' got more if I'd stood up. Dem sneaking rats."

"I see you changed your mind about your pals," said Biggles. "You should have known better."

"Don rub it in, mister. I guess I had it a'comin'," said Christophe philosophically.

"You're an American citizen, aren't you?" "Sure."

"Do you want to go home or stay here?"

"Dat's a hard question. I ain't done yet."

"It looks to me as if you're very much done." "Where's Dessalines?"

"I don't know. The machine came back without him."

"Guess they must 'ave bumped him off. Dem cheap skates. Mebbe even now dey ain't so smart as dey tink."

"What do you mean by that?"

Christophe gave Biggles a knowing look. In fact, he winked. "Dey ain't so wise," he said slowly. "I'se still got a card to play."

Biggles looked at the man curiously. "Then if you take my advice you'll play it now." Christophe considered Biggles thoughtfully. "I guess you must be one o' dese straight guys you hear about but never meet. If I come clean will you take me some place where I can get dese holes in me filled up?"

"I'd no intention of leaving you for the hyenas, anyway," Biggles told him curtly. "There's nothing I can do here, except get you over to some friends of mine who'll fix you up as best they can while I fetch a plane with some first aid kit. Then I'll take you to the nearest British hospital."

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"Dat's mighty kind o' you, mister. Now I'll tell you sommat. You'se a friend o' General Mander?" "Yes."

"Is'e got his bag."

Biggles stared. "What bag?"

"His bag o' papers what dem rats wanted so bad. Dey think they got 'em. Gimme forty grand for 'em. But what dey got was de bags of his lieutenants, which I guess don mean much. Yeah! I was holding out on 'em."

This was better news than Biggles expected. "Where is the General's bag?"

"Under the floor-boards in my office. I'll show you." Christophe staggered to his feet.

"Not now," decided Biggles. "That will have to wait till I get back. Come on. I'll help you."

Christophe put a hand on Biggles's shoulder and in slow time they made their way to where Ginger was watching this strange scene in open eyed amazement.

"We can't waste any more time," Biggles told Ginger. "I'm going to meet Algy. Do what you can for Christophe. He says he's still got some teeth but I don't think he'll bite you. See you later."

With a curious expression on his face Biggles set off on his journey. BIGGLES WALKED ON.

In speaking to Christophe he had been prompted by common humanity. He had offered to help him for no other reason. The man had been foolish, he thought; ill-advised rather than wicked, persuaded to commit an act of folly by glib-tongued enemy agents who saw in him a useful tool to serve their ends. Maybe Christophe, who was a simple man but by no means a fool, had always suspected that, pondered Biggles; which was why he had double-crossed them.

Anyway, the man was now down and out. He could do no further mischief, and Biggles was not prepared to leave him to become the prey of hyenas and vultures which, with their uncanny instinct, would soon be on the scene of bloodshed. For Biggles knew only too well the inevitable fate of a helpless man in the wilder parts of Africa. Aside from that, he thought, again with mounting anger, there could be no possible excuse for the murderous attack that had been made on Christophe and his supporters, some of whom may have been, merely ignorant negroes carried away by Christophe's grandiose scheme for a black empire. Biggles's expression became grim as he recalled the way they had been shot

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down without warning, without a chance. Biggles had no reason to regard any of them with affection but his soul revolted at such an act of callous, unscrupulous brutality. But then, that was the way of the people who had ordered the raid. Lives were nothing to them. He was surprised, and disappointed, that von Stalhein, ruthless though he knew him to be, had lent himself to such an enterprise. The victims had done him no injury. Biggles wondered where the attacking force had come from, and where it had gone. Did Christophe know? It was, presumably, still in Africa, in which case it would have to be rooted

out. Such a gang could do nothing but harm.

He pushed on, determined to get as far as possible before the pitiless sun started its daily flaying of the open plain. Which is not to say that he took no precautions against being seen by natives who might still be about, although they would, he thought, and hoped, be more concerned with pillaging the huts in the compound now that Christophe and most of the soldiers were no longer there to keep them under control. But his chief concern was for Algy's return. He was afraid that without medical attention Bertie's wounds, slight as they were, would, in that climate, soon become septic. They were all in urgent need of food and water, too. To go drinking the dirty water of the river was to invite dysentery. Algy could be relied upon to get back at the earliest possible moment, but anything like a delay for reasons beyond his control, always a factor to be considered in off-the-map aviation, must prove fatal to the whole party. He walked on, always watching, moving from cover to cover, now with that mechanical stride that comes to men whose strength is finished but who will not give up. Some vultures began to keep pace with him, flying from tree to tree. Others were dropping out of the blue

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sky. They knew the signs. A hyena skulked not far away. Another joined it. They, too, were gathering for the feast.

Biggles was not afraid of them. He knew they would not dare to come within reach while he was on his feet. He was more afraid of hunting dogs which, working in packs, have a worse reputation for savagery. So far he had seen none.

He struggled on, the sun searing his eyes and drying the perspiration on his skin as fast as it formed. His tongue was like a piece of old leather in his mouth. But always his ears listened for the sound which would bring their only hope of survival. An aircraft. But not a whisper broke the sultry silence. The tortured air quivered in the heat. On all sides stretched the limitless plain of pale brown sun-dried grass. Overhead, the sky of implacable blue, without a cloud. The ant hills began to take on strange forms, like deformed men and animals.

Knowing that he must be getting close to the rendezvous, which Ginger had described to him, he stared more and more often into the shimmering distances, which seemed to go on endlessly, hoping to see the aircraft standing there; but there was nothing remotely resembling an aircraft. A lioness stood up to look at him.

At the finish, it was a stick to which still clung a strip of Ginger's shirt that told him when he had reached the improvised landing ground. He gazed around. No aircraft. Algy wasn't

there. He didn't really expect to find him there for it was still early for the appointment, so swaying slightly, he made his way to the meagre shade of the scrub and sat down to wait.

What he feared now was that he would fall asleep, a sleep so deep that not even the noise of an aircraft engine would wake him; for, as he knew, there comes 151

a time when the demands of nature are no longer to be resisted. Wherefore every time he caught himself nodding he would get up and walk a little way. The sun climbed over its zenith and began its long journey back to the horizon. The vultures were coming closer now. A hyena came within a dozen yards, slaving in anticipation. He eyed the beast with cold hostility. Taking out his pistol he fired at it. But his hand was unsteady; the shot missed, but the animal scampered off. But it did not go far. At the report he thought he heard something move in the bushes behind him, but he was too weary to investigate. It was, his watch told him, nearly three o'clock when he heard the sound he so eagerly awaited. The vibrant hum of an aircraft. There seemed something strange about it. Getting up, he lifted his eyes to the sky and saw not one aircraft but two. He made them out to be a Hastings and an Auster. What the Hastings was doing there he couldn't imagine, and as von Stalhein was hardly likely to be flying in consort with Algy he didn't care.

He was about to walk into the open to signal his position when a bulky object rather more solid than a bush, a little further along the fringe of the scrub, attracted his attention. He hadn't noticed it before. He rubbed his bloodshot eyes, and staring, saw that it was a rhinoceros. It was standing quite still, gazing out across the plain, at a distance of not more than a dozen yards. He realized that it must have been close all the time, and perhaps explained the movement he had heard when he had shot at the hyena. Now Biggles was not given to swearing, holding it to be a waste of both time and breath; but he mentally called the beast some names that were perhaps not quite fair, since the animal was on its own ground and he was the intruder. It was, he did not doubt, the same 152

rhino that had given Ginger a fright near the same spot. He daren't move. The creature stood like a rock, its little piggy eyes staring straight in front of it, obviously \_ listening to the unfamiliar sound

coming from the air. Fortunately there was not even a suspicion of a breeze or the beast must have winded him.

The two aircraft came into sight, losing height, the Auster now leading, presumably to show the large machine the way in. They came round, touched down, and ran to a stop about sixty yards away from where Biggles stood. The engines died. From the cockpit of the Auster jumped Algy. Out of the Hastings got Tony Wragg. Then Biggles understood, although he could not imagine what had brought Tony back. He was satisfied to know that the Hastings must have delivered its passengers at some safe aerodrome. Algy and Tony looked around, talking; then, apparently satisfied that there was no one there, retired to the shade provided by the big machine obviously intending to wait. Biggles fumed—but he stood still with the rhino so close. He simply dare not move. Indeed, he dare hardly breathe. And so three or four minutes passed. To Biggles it seemed a good deal longer.

At the finish it was the tick bird that gave him away, one of the feathered friends of the rhino in that they not only eat the insects on his back but serve as sentries. The bird arrived, and was in the act of settling on the beast's broad back when it saw Biggles; or so it can be supposed, for it let out a startled squawk and flapped into the air. The rhino needed no second warning. With a snort it turned about and plunged into the bushes. Biggles's relief need not be described. He walked, or rather, staggered, towards the aircraft.

Algy and Tony, who had sprung to their feet at the noise made by the rhino, saw him at once, and hurried

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to meet him; and as they drew near Algy's face expressed his concern at Biggles's appearance. He broke into a run. "Good heavens, Biggles," he cried. "What's happened."

"It's all right, although Bertie's been hurt," answered Biggles. "Get me a drink." Algy dashed back to the aircraft, Biggles and Tony following slowly. Said Biggles to Tony : "What are you doing here?"

Tony explained that he had taken his passengers to Dakar, and there he had run into Algy. On learning what he intended to do he had insisted on coming back with him in case he needed help.

"That was noble of you," stated Biggles. "You'd plenty of reasons for keeping clear of this place."



Algy came back with a can of water. Biggles drank it slowly, with pauses between gulps.

"That's better," he declared.

"What happened?"

"I can't go into details now, but von Stalhein attacked Christophe's outfit in force and mopped the place up. Ginger and Bertie are on the edge of the airstrip waiting for us so let's get mobile. We might as well have both machines along. I'll fly with you in the Auster, Algy."

In another minute the machines were in the air, and within five had touched down on the airstrip. On the way Biggles gave Algy a brief explanation of the situation. As they glided in he broke off, however, a frown of alarm and anxiety creasing his forehead; for standing just in the open where he had left the others were four or five of Christophe's troops, men who had survived the attack or had been in the compound when it was launched.

"Taxi right up to where those men are standing,"

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Biggles told Algy. "From the way they're behaving I don't think they've any sting left." A moment later Ginger's appearance among them confirmed this.

He came to meet them as they got down. "Good thing you left Christophe with us, with a promise to take him out," he told Biggles. "Five minutes after you'd gone these troops of his came along and found us. They were all for cutting us up, but Christophe put things right. Some of the forest blacks came along, too, but they cleared off when the troops told 'em to."

"How's Bertie?"

"No worse. In fact, I think he's a little better. Christophe sent one of his men for water."

"Good. Get the medicine chest out of the machine, and the grub box." The next two hours were spent getting everybody comfortable. Bertie's wounds, and those of Christophe, were dressed. Everyone had a long overdue meal, and a wash, and those who needed it, a shave. By the time this business was finished a different atmosphere prevailed, and Biggles announced his intention of pushing along to Dakar, where

they could rest, and from where he could get in touch with the Air-Commodore. But there was one more thing to be done. He looked at Christophe. "Now, what about General Mander's bag?" he inquired.

Christophe hesitated. "Dere's some dollars dere with it. Do I get my money? You see," he explained, "I'se got to pay dese men o' mine."

Biggles shrugged. "I suppose that's fair enough. If the money's yours—well, it's yours as far as I'm concerned. But I can't take any responsibility for what the United States government might say about that."

"Dat's good enough for me, mister," returned Christophe, and revealed where the bag, and the

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money, were to be found. He offered to send with him those of his troops who were still alive as an escort against the natives who were not to be trusted—an offer which Biggles accepted with a smile. The idea of any of these people trusting each other struck him as funny.

"All right. Algy, you come with me," he ordered. "The rest of you can get ready to board the plane. We might as well take the jeep," he went on, speaking to Algy as they set off. "I don't think it came to any harm in the shooting."

With four of Christophe's troops hanging on they were soon outside Christophe's headquarters. Going into the bedroom, leaving the troops outside, they had no difficulty in finding, under the bed, the trap door Christophe had described. Biggles lifted the lid, and there lay the General's portfolio. There, too, were so many packets of dollar bills that he let out a low whistle. "Suffering Jupiter !" he exclaimed. "Christophe certainly did make his pals pay through the nose. Just a minute!" He peeled off one of the notes and examined it closely. "I wouldn't say for certain, but I have a feeling that these notes are phoney. If they are, that, for Christophe, will be about the final crack. Well, he chose his pals, I didn't. I wouldn't say anything about it—yet. Let him pay his troops or they may cut up rough. You know—where ignorance is bliss. . . ."

They stuffed the notes into their pockets. Biggles took the bag and they returned to the jeep. In five minutes they were back on the airfield. Biggles gave Ginger the bag to put in the machine. The notes he gave to Christophe with a brief "Here you are." Christophe paid his men who, having guilty consciences, had elected to make their way on

the coast-having, Biggles suspected, looted the camp of anything worth taking. That was all. They took their places in the aircraft, Tony at the controls, and a few minutes later the scene of Christophe's ambitious project was fading away astern. THERE IS LITTLE MORE to tell beyond one or two details

about which the reader may be curious. The two aircraft, the Hastings and the Auster, flew to Accra, the British airport on the Gold Coast, where Bertie and Christophe were sent straight to hospital, and Biggles, before doing anything else, sent a radio signal to Air-Commodore Raymond, who came out as fast as a plane could bring him. By the time of his arrival Biggles and Ginger had had some sleep, some food and a bath, and showed little signs of what they had been through.

Biggles told the Air-Commodore all that had happened, handing him General Mander's portfolio which, as the General was already on his way to the United States was passed to the American Consul. That was the last they saw of it. Some time later Biggles had a letter from the General thanking him for recovering it.

Bertie was only a couple of days in hospital. As soon as he was discharged as fit to travel they all flew home. Christophe was in hospital for some time. Of what finally became of him nothing was known, beyond the fact that he was "taken care of" by the United States authorities—whatever that might mean. The dollar notes, as Biggles suspected, turned out to be spurious,

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which explained why von Stalhein or his employers were prepared to pay a high price to Christophe for certain documents. As the money was worthless it didn't matter how much they paid.

The fate of Dessalines, Christophe's partner, remained a mystery. He was never heard of again. If he was not killed by the conspirators when they seized the aircraft then he must have realized that the game was up and gone into hiding.

How von Stalhein and his associates left the country was never ascertained. Biggles was in favour of proceeding forthwith on a search for the Hastings which it was thought must still be in Africa, but as there was no clue as to which way it had flown the Air-Commodore held that it would be a waste of time to search the entire continent.

R.A.F. and military units stationed in Africa were warned to be on the watch for it, but no reports from them were received. But von Stalhein must have known that the authorities would be on the look-out for him, for when, weeks after, the machine was found on the ground by some natives, it was less than a hundred miles from where it had taken' off—in the French Sudan, to be precise.

The Liberian Government, as was expected, denied all knowledge of the affair. It could have been the truth, for they volunteered the information that a number of foreign traders and commercial agents in the capital had disappeared suddenly. Some of these might have comprised the force collected to attack Christophe's camp. But nothing could be proved.

So ended the story of the missing machines. On the face of it, it was an extraordinary affair; but as Biggles pointed out, it was really no more extraordinary than other events in an age wherein the extraordinary had become the rule rather than the exception.



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